

Apocrypha

Seth Kallen Deitch

Xenolite Press

APOCRYPHA

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FIRST EDITION

Preface

The stories contained herein are all salvaged from my first decade as a writer. Before I was a writer I thought I was a painter, musician, publisher and a number of other things. I knew I liked reading and I used to bat around ideas for stories, but I never so much as touched a typewriter. I came into possession of a used word processor about two years before everyone suddenly had a computer. Just to amuse myself, I sat down to write a story in the style of Edgar Rice Burroughs. It was just a bit of far fetched fun adventure. It turned into a novel and I realized about two thirds of the way through that I was a writer. Well, it took me a little time, however, to realize that I was a *bad* writer. I was getting better, though.

That first book taught me a lot of what-not-to-do's. So did the second and the third. I was hung up on writing at length and the results were not as satisfying as they might have been. I owe a lot to my father during that period for not pulling any punches in his reviews of my work. If he thought something was bloody awful, he had no problem telling me so. I did have moments of thinking him cruel, but the fact is I'm much better off for having heard it. This book owes everything to him.

My mother who is a voracious reader also read my stuff, but she was more inclined to be nice rather than bluntly enlightening like Dad. She did do proofreading for me and I really needed it badly. If she had nothing good to say, she said nothing at all unless I dragged it out of her. She was the one I went to when I just needed encouragement which was frequently. This book also owes everything to her.

Contents

Mercator's Ape	1
The Laugh at Midnight	13
Kevin	29
Mister Meat	43
The Face in the Echoes	61
Parallel Resonant Fields and the Xenocontinua	77
At the Core of Mars	95
The Institute	165
The Terror from Time	203
Two Moons Dreaming	221
Ocean Sea	225

Rob Chalfen and I once made an agreement to supply one another with a title for a story and the other one would write the story. The title I supplied him with was "Garden Airplane Trap" the title of a Max Ernst painting. That story never got written and I eventually stopped asking about it. The last time I did, he just complained that it was a horrible title and that no story could possibly be written with it in mind. Someday I will write that story and prove him wrong.

The following story uses the title he gave me. It is one of my favorite early shorts.

Mercator's Ape

Antwerp's morning light slanted in through the museum's window revealing a thousand swirling dust motes and illuminating the browned parchment in the glass case.

Here lay the clue I needed to find the source of a legend that had been alluded to in hushed tones in natural history circles or recorded as mythic traveler's tales for centuries. In all that time, there had been only a single picture and a single clue to the location.

I had seen reproductions of this map many times before, but this was my first time in the presence of the original. It wasn't the version that had been used in the great Atlas, but an earlier draft that was based on information gathered from traders and explorers.

Gerhard Kremer's map depicted Europe, West Asia and North Africa. As is the case with many maps of the time, this one was decorated with allegorical figures. Anthropomorphic clouds with distended cheeks mightily blew the four winds. In the north of Scandinavia stood the figure of a Sami herdsman with a reindeer at his side. Near the eastern edge was a turbaned Mohammedan with a woman in purdah and a camel. In the western portion of Africa stood a mostly naked Negro with a lion, an elephant and a creature that resembled a baboon. Curiously, the creature held a spear. The seas were decorated with images of ships and sea dragons.

Kremer, more commonly known as Gerardus Mercator, was the creator of the first modern Atlas of the world as it was known in his day. His final update of the information came in 1578, but this map was from far earlier dating from 1541 when he was working on his first model of the Earth.

My interest was not in cartography; I'm a zoologist. It was the spear-bearing monkey that I had come to see.

The curator had been blandly nattering on as I had become absorbed in the map's decorations, and only now did his voice work its way forward once more from the edge of my consciousness.

“...so you see, sir, I cannot possibly allow the map to be removed from the case without approval from the board. You must understand that it is a national treasure.”

I shook my head slightly to return myself to the here and now. “Of course, I understand, mijnheer Rijtmaan. I’m sure that a clear photograph will suffice. Can you supply me with such a thing?”

“Without a doubt, Doctor Maes. It is always our pleasure to help visiting scholars.”

“I don’t have my doctorate yet, sir, but with the museum’s help, I’m sure that I can complete the research on the final portion of my thesis.”

The curator smiled benignly. “If you will follow me to the restorations room, I believe we have a file of photos from which you may choose.”

That evening, in my hotel room I gazed at the image at greater length. The monkey didn’t closely resemble any living species of baboon, but it clearly was intended to represent a specific type. Its muzzle was decorated with white stripes and its short tail was also white while the rest of its fur was an even light brown.

The spear was also unique, having a broad, heavy stone tip and a shaft that tapered toward the rear. I had built models of it back in Boston and discovered that the design was particularly accurate when thrown underhand. It was unlike any kind of spear in the Peabody collection or in that of the American Museum. I didn’t even know why I had needed to come to Belgium to see the original of the map, for seeing it only confirmed what I already knew, that I really needed to be in Africa.

It took four months and a larger portion of my trust fund than I would have liked, but following a trail of vague anecdotes, footnotes in older volumes and the legends told by a few natives who’s story telling came at an exorbitant price, I found myself on a small and bumpy single prop airplane headed for Ouagadougou.

In spite of the fact that it was a national capital, booking a guide to take me into the countryside was difficult and took me several days. Finally, I was able to engage the services of a man named Pierre who owned a Hummer and spoke only an odd dialect of French, which I spoke only poorly, and Mande, which I spoke not at all. He insisted that his ten-year-old son, Henri, accompany us, although all the boy did the entire, uncomfortable journey was stare at me and grin with brilliant white teeth.

From what I could make out of Pierre’s responses to my questions, he claimed that he knew where the monkeys I sought might be able to be found. The problem was that I was unsure if he had understood the question and he had seemed so hungry for employment, that I’m sure if I had told him that I

was seeking a land where dinosaurs still survived, or the lost mines of King Solomon, he would have assured me that he could lead me to those as well.

We drove over sometimes-nonexistent roads for over four hundred kilometers into southern Gourma province. The region was mostly rather ugly brown grassland spotted with small stands of trees. From time to time we would pass small farms worked by impoverished looking people. One of these farmers, for the price of a single Franc, slaughtered and cooked a chicken for us and served it with rice and greens.

Through Pierre's translation, I asked the farmer if he had ever seen the Baboon with the striped muzzle. I showed him a blow up of the illustration on the map.

Although he replied in the negative, he afterwards grew less animated and soon found an excuse to ask us, politely but firmly, to take our leave.

We drove another half day until we came to the place Pierre specified. All he said was, "In this place, we will wait." He told Henri to sit on the roof of the Hummer and watch for the monkeys.

Pierre and I engaged ourselves in a game of dominoes with peculiar rules that the guide kept changing, or so it seemed. As he was beating me for the second time, Henri's voice came, "*Ecoutez!*"

When we stuck out our heads, we heard a loud rustling from the branches of a distant tree as a large bird took wing. A spear shot from a shady part of the treetop and struck the bird, stunning it rather than piercing it through. Evidently, the point was not as sharp as it looked.

Almost instantly, like a breaking wave, a troop of baboons flowed down the trunk of the tree and set upon the fallen bird, shrieking and roaring at one another as they tore the carcass apart into bloody gobbets. Some of the larger males carried what were clearly knives and spears. Many of both sexes wore ornaments on bits of twisted vine around their necks.

In my mind, I saw a Nobel Prize with the name of Peter N. Maes, Ph.D. on it.

The monkeys jabbered at one another constantly and I heard a lot of the same sound patterns repeated over and over again. Could it be? Could it be that these animals used spoken language? They made weapons and used tools; I would name this creature *papio oratis*, the talking baboon.

They were thoroughly loathsome in every particular, hideous to behold and possessing the vilest of habits. As we watched the creatures alternately attempt to kill one another or mount one another without particular regard for the sex of the unlucky monkey being mounted. The males constantly struck at one another with the shafts of their spears while screaming ape invective even long after the mangled corpse of the bird had been consumed.

“Surely these are devils incarnate!” I said.

“Non, Monsieur”, said Pierre, “They are very sacred creatures, brought closer to the ways of man by the ancient spirits!”

“You mean they haven’t always been this way?”

Over the riot of the baboons, Pierre told me a strange tale.

“In the days before the French men came or the German men or the English men or even before the Roman men, there came to this country the Egyptian men who worshiped the Sun, the Cat, the Hawk and other animals. They also worshiped the Baboon. There had come among the Egyptian men a great chief who was called “Pharaoh” who called upon his priests to speak to the living gods in the world.

“Try as they might, even the greatest and wisest of their priests could not talk to the animals that they held sacred. They decided to start breeding groups of animals based upon their skill at talking. The cat and the hawk showed no skill at talking, no matter how many generations were bred, the baboon started to show some understanding. Some of the smartest ones were able to speak a few words of Egyptian after twenty generations. After five more generations there were some among them who could speak quite well.

“The colony of priests grew old and were replaced by new priests who, in their turn grew old and were replaced and so on, until they had been here a hundred years. By that time there was a new Pharaoh who was far less interested in talking to the baboons. The Pharaoh sent word to the priests that they must return to the land of the Nile within ten years and to bring some of the talking baboons back with them.

“In the final ten years, they helped the baboons build a city with a temple and anointed one of their number as Pharaoh of their land.

“Our tales do not tell what became of the priests and the baboons who went back to the Nile valley, but they do tell of the fate of the baboon city.

“The baboons were unfit for the ways of man and their animal heritage was strong in them. In only another hundred years, they had stopped speaking Egyptian and had started speaking a language of their own. The baboon Pharaoh was overthrown, killed and eaten and his dynasty was forgotten.

“The city entered a new age with several strong males in control who were always at war with one another. The walls and temples were taken apart to make a group of smaller fortifications for the individual clans. They also made war with the human tribes who lived in the region spreading chaos wherever they went. Finally, around 1400, the king of Songhay paid a local army to destroy the city and kill or chase off its inhabitants. After a terrible

battle in which over two thousand died on both sides, the deed was done. The baboons were once again wild animals.”

Pierre’s story was obvious bunk. Whether it was myth, legend or simply pure snake oil, I could not immediately determine, but one of them it surely was.

We stayed in the land of the tool using baboons for a week observing their lives. Their language certainly didn’t resemble ancient Egyptian although I was able to identify a few loan words. *Ra* meant day; obviously coming from the name of the Sun god and *pet* was sky, perhaps from the Egyptian word for heaven. *Net* was a bee and *shapur* was to change, which might have come from *kheper*, which was the Egyptian word for the same thing, but for the most part, the baboon language was wholly original to the creatures.

The “spears” that some of the males carried were actually more like clubs. They had wedge shaped heads, but the monkeys didn’t have enough dexterity to flake the stone tips into truly sharp edges. They were still quite effective weapons when thrown and could bring down birds, small antelope and other baboons with fair ease. The baboons were known to raid local farms and villages in an organized fashion when their food supply ran short, but they were wary of guns and thus kept these raids to a minimum. They had actually laid their hands on a few rifles over the years, but tended to abandon them fairly quickly, as they lacked the manual dexterity to reload them, even if they had comprehended that they could in fact be reloaded.

I ended up taking a lot of photos and several miles of rather repetitive video tape for the week that I was able to afford to keep Pierre in my employ, and then we had to leave. I shot a male, a female and a juvenile and arranged to have to have them shipped to the Agassiz collection in Cambridge where they could be dissected and eventually mounted.

I returned home with what I thought was rather scant material for a major paper. Nonetheless, I published a short article, which appeared in Harvard Magazine and gave an interview to a guy from Discover Magazine.

Various persons in the zoology department viewed the photos and videotape with interest and some of the linguistics people were able to decipher some more of the baboon language. Harvard offered to send an official expedition to the region when a revolution broke out in Burkina Faso. It only lasted fifty days, but was bloody in the extreme. When it was over, a fifth of the country’s population were either dead, imprisoned or refugees. I reached Pierre by phone and he confirmed my worst fear, the talking baboons could no longer be found in Gourma.

When I reported this news to my advisors, I found that the reaction was not quite as I had expected. I was accused of having perpetrated a hoax. The bodies of the baboons, which had been sent to the museum, were found to be an existing species, and since they were dead, they could not talk.

I fought it for many months, but it was a no-win situation. By year's end, I was no longer welcome at Harvard and it seemed unlikely that I would even be able to finish my degree in the United States.

For two years, I was a semi-welcome guest in my father's house in Westport, but even in a home as large as his, it seemed that I was always in the way and his restrictions on my life rankled me.

I spent less and less time in the house and more and more in a local pub which was leading my life in predictable directions. Even so, the pain of slavery to drink was less than the pain of knowing that I could have been something and failed.

I was not the only fallen scholar to frequent the place. Jeffrey Ardman, a medievalist from Yale who had plagiarized a portion of his master's thesis, proved to be my ideal boon companion. It was he who told me an odd little tale, which perhaps saved me from ultimate dissolution.

We had been discussing academic oddities of the late middle ages when he brought up the story of an alchemist named Jozsef VonGelling who promoted himself more as a wizard than a scientist. A comical tale was told about him regarding how he appeared in Vienna in the summer of 1464 with a strange creature in tow. It was said the animal was once a wayward apprentice of his who had meddled with a formula that he shouldn't have and accidentally transformed himself into a dog. VonGelling claimed that through hard work, he had begun to transform him back to a human being but had only gotten him halfway there. The creature was reputedly hideous, with the hands and eyes of a man but the face of a dog. It babbled nonsense in German and Latin as well as some unknown tongue, much of which sounded like magical incantations. It terrified the women and children and caused the priests to cross themselves and utter prayers under their breaths. In spite of the absurdity of the story, the description of the creature was amazingly detailed, right down to the white stripes on the dog-man's muzzle.

I told my story about the talking baboons to Jeffrey, who instantly agreed that the creature described must be the same species. Together we set about trying to find other references to the talking baboons, in libraries, museums and on the Internet. Once we knew that it was out there, references turned up left and right.

Sardinia, 1243. Fra Benedicto Salvi had brought into his presence, a captured demon. It had been found being kept as a pet by a sailor. The monster was formed as if from equal parts of dog, ape and man. It spoke learnedly to the priest on a number of subjects including science, literature and religion. It was not a Christian and earnestly attempted to shake Father Salvi's faith repeatedly until the priest called in a burly blacksmith to behead the creature. The sailor was burned as a witch. Fra Salvi is now a saint.

Tripoli, 1034. Sultan Ahmed IV was noted to have had a curious dwarf at his court who could do amazing acrobatic feats and make fine jests. He was, however, hideously ugly having been cursed with the face of a snarling dog.

Rome, 307. The Caesar Galerius was noted to have caged in his personal library a large monkey from Africa that was reputed to speak in some Ethiopic language. It was said to have learned a few words of Latin before succumbing to fever.

Memphis, 340 BC. (An inscription from a temple wall) *"Mighty Ra, how have we strayed that the holy beasts will no longer serve. They have forgotten your ways and think only of food and fornication. They must be turned out. They must go into the world to survive or perish, your will be served."* (There is an accompanying frieze, which depicts baboons dressed in priestly vestments being driven into the fields by priests with sticks and soldiers with bows. The baboons have white striped muzzles.)

Khan Balik, 1292. (From *Travels* by Marco Polo) *"Wonders from the world over passed through the court of the great Khan. On any given day, the mighty king would be presented with birds of a hundred colors or exotic delicacies from distant lands. On a day when I myself stood in his presence, some sort of ape was brought before him and greeted him in the **formal tongue of Cathay!** This wondrous animal reputedly loved to gamble and entertained the great Khan by losing numerous games of chance to him."*

These and many other small notations led me to believe that the speaking monkey had perhaps spread to other regions of the globe before it was forced into extinction in its native land.

Jeffrey also found references from St. Augustine and Charles Fort which were convincing. The most recent, however was from 1978. A study being conducted in extra sensory perception in the city then known as Gorky, made mention of "certain advanced monkeys" being used *because they could speak*. After much searching, most of it in so-called "New Age" bookstores, we finally turned up a photograph. It was only in black and white, but the distinctive muzzle markings were still quite apparent.

The poor creature had numerous electrodes surgically implanted in its skull and was locked into some sort of steel chair. A suspension microphone hung about three inches from its mouth. The caption said, "talking chimpanzee (Sic.) used to interpret psychic signals. His less complicated brain, it is believed, makes him more susceptible to outside influences than a human being".

There was no name given for the research facility, and given the changes in that part of the world since the work was published, I didn't hold out too much hope for finding it.

Jeffrey, however, was enthused and insisted that we aggressively pursue this lead to the bitter end. It turned out that he had enough money to follow up any whim that took his fancy and was happy to have me along for the ride.

There were no direct flights to Nizhniy-Novgorod. We had to fly to Berlin and from there to Moscow and finally after an almost sixteen hour layover during which we were offered at least twenty investment opportunities, we were finally on a twenty seat prop-plane heading east.

This once great trading city showed the stress of having been a quarantine area under the Soviet regime. Upon the fall of the Union, most of the professional class had moved away. There was a large automobile factory and a huge rail junction and most of the people in town seemed to work for one of those two concerns. Every third building outside of the center of town seemed to be boarded up, while many others seemed to have been taken over by the Russian incarnation of "flower children". In asking directions, we encountered virtually no one, no one who spoke English in any case, who had been there more than ten years. The entire population seemed to have changed since 1978. In spite of the fact that this was Russia's third largest city, it had a rather forgotten feel about it.

Finally, using a Russian phrasebook and the good will of many patient people, we found the site of the lab. It turned out that it was not in the city itself, but in a suburb called Gorodets. The lab was inside a one-story cinderblock building next to a bridge on the Volga bank.

There was a single person, and virtually nothing else inside, he gave his name as "Gospodin Kolanov". He was a caretaker for several unused government buildings like this one. Kolanov spoke a few words of English and tried to answer as many of our questions as he could. We discovered, to our joy, that he had been caretaker back when the place had still been a lab.

We showed him the photo of the baboon. His reaction was unexpected.

"Tovar...excuse me please, *Gospodin* Sulin."

Jeffrey looked at me blankly. "Huh?" He inquired.

"He says its Mister Sulin."

"Yeah, but..." He turned his attention back to Kolanov. "Where could we find this Sulin today?"

"Pertamboi."

"Pertamboi. Where is that?" I asked.

The answer was my biggest surprise of the day. "New Jersey, America."

"Perth Amboy?!?"

I smacked my forehead in disgust. Then I asked mister Kolanov if he had an address.

Did you know that you could get direct flights from Moscow to Newark? That was our *happy* surprise of the day. Within another twenty-four hours we were in a rented car heading south from Newark. It was only about a forty-minute drive to Perth Amboy.

The address that Mister Kolanov supplied led us to a pleasant, tree-lined street where a group of kids were playing stickball. As we pulled onto the street, one of them shouted out the word "Car!" and they all cleared out of the roadway.

I pulled over next to the kids and asked, "Do any of you know where I can find Mister Antoinin Sulin?"

They all looked puzzled, but one spoke up from the back. "He means the midget!"

Jeffrey got out of the car. "My goodness! What a bright young fellow! How would you like to make a dollar?"

The kid scrambled to the front of the group. "I'd like to make *five dollars* a whole lot more!"

Jeffrey only curled his lip slightly and said, "Five dollars it is. Can you take us to his house?"

The first thing to strike me about the place was that the garden was beautiful. Really beautiful. The gardener had collected wildflowers from the area and arranged them tastefully and artistically all around the small ranch house.

With both anticipation and trepidation, I rang the doorbell. A middle aged black woman in a maid's uniform answered it.

"Kin ah hep you?" she inquired.

"Is Mister Sulin at home?" I noticed on the wall in the foyer was a framed reproduction of the very map I had examined in Antwerp.

A voice came from the back of the house. "Amanda! Who iss det? I expectink no one."

"May ah ask your name?"

"My name is Peter Maes and this is Jeffrey Ardman."

"MAES!" exclaimed the voice from the back.

In a few seconds an old and grizzled baboon hobbled into the foyer with a cane. The maid opened the door and admitted us.

The monkey wore a pair of denim pants obviously made for a small boy and a baggy sweater. He also was wearing a very large pair of canvas basketball shoes and a fedora hat. White bands clearly marked his dog-like muzzle.

"Maes! I read your article! It is aztonnishing! You find my family!"

I tried to maintain my composure. Its not every day that one comes face to face with a Russian accented baboon.

"Found and lost, mister...Sulin?"

"Yes! Yes! I am Sulin!"

"You speak so much better than others of your kind we have met."

The maid, Amanda, stepped in front of me. "What de *hail* do you mean 'his kind'?" Her feathers were definitely ruffled. "Mebby you want to go talkin' 'bout *mah* kind next!"

Jeffrey whispered in my ear. "I don't believe that this lady perceives Mister Sulin as something other than human."

"Er, Amanda is it? I meant no disrespect to mister Sulin, or to you for that matter. I only..."

"Amanda, not to be gettink your panties in a bunch! Mister Maes is friend! Will you have tea, Mister Maes? Mister Ardman?"

With his own hands, the baboon served us tea and "Chips Ahoy" cookies from the supermarket. He was surprisingly deft even though he had to actually leap up onto the kitchen counter to prepare the tea and then leap with the teapot and plate of cookies in hand to the tabletop to serve us. Amanda hummed loudly as she dusted in the next room, but didn't join us.

"You know, I *am* Russian. Everyone I ever knew like me was born in Soviet Union. I have medal from regional science commissar for my work!" He grinned, showing truly frightening fangs.

"How did you learn to speak so well?" I asked again.

Sulin tapped his head with a gnarled black finger. "Psychic! They give drugs to make us more receptive. Some it kill. Some it make crazy. Me and two others it make psychic! Now I know sometimes when things are to happen. Sometimes I know what others thinking. I can pick up other languages, at least some languages very fast."

Jeffrey said, "You seem to be as intelligent as a human being. No offense, but, how can that be with your brain size?"

The baboon leaned forward and showed more teeth than before. "Ha! I fool you!" Again he tapped his rather small cranium. "Psychic, I use brains of others to think the hard things for me! I not even able to *read* when Amanda is not here. I don't get jokes on "Seinfeld" reruns. When people around I can...what is word...network! I can network with their minds and work problems."

We spoke for a few hours. Eventually, I had to tell Sulin what had happened to his African brethren. Although he was stricken with grief, we knew that he would at least momentarily forget about it when we left the house.

Sulin was over forty years old, which was quite an advanced age for a baboon and would live only two more years at most. The other two like him were presumably somewhere in Russia as well as several others who were less gifted.

It all turned out to be a sort of melancholy and yet less than dramatic tale of the rise and fall of Mercator's ape. More than likely, the remaining members of his species could be counted on less than the fingers of both hands and even if they were to make a comeback, whether or not they had a legitimate place in the world was questionable.

I made a point of speaking to Antonin Sulin on the phone at least once a week although the quality of the conversation varied depending on if Amanda was there or not.

I convinced a couple of the Harvard administrators to come with me to the little house in New Jersey to meet Sulin and prove that my paper was not fraudulent which resulted in my being readmitted to the doctoral program. Even so, I chose not to write further about *papio oratus* and concentrated on studies with a certain South American planaria worm. They never talked, but they also never cost me huge airfares.

The following was a blatant attempt to write a '30's style pulp detective/adventure story. I assumed that I had little chance of ever selling it, but it turned out to be the first story that I ever sold for a respectable amount of money, fifty bucks American!

The Laugh at Midnight

I

A light rain had wetted the street to a black marble reflectivity. In the harsh spotlight beam of a street light two large, grim faced men went about the business of bullying a woman with an evil ingenuity. Meaty fists rose and fell in the course of their wicked work while the faces displayed no emotion whatsoever. Stray blond hairs clung to her drenched face as the girl looked up at her tormentors with a profound lack of understanding. "Why?" she screamed through her tears, "Why are you doing this to me?"

There was no response from the thugs as they threw her to the pavement and tore at her clothing. She lay in a heap, wet and half naked, sobbing. The two turned to leave.

"Tell your boyfriend that this was for him from the Maestro." said the smaller of the two.

The quiet evening air was shattered by an eerie, hollow laugh that filled the soul with an ineffable dread. He stood partly hidden in the shadows, dapper in a dinner jacket, .45 drawn.

"That's no way to treat a lady." The voice came from some far away place and time, evoking shifting sands and ancient mystery. Stepping into the light, he was revealed to be wearing a domino mask over his dark countenance. His patent leather slick hair was topped with a red fez worn at a jaunty angle.

"Got lost on the way to a costume party, pal?" inquired the uglier of the two.

The mystery man leveled the gun at the two who had stopped cold upon seeing this dangerously comic apparition. The .45 spat softly and red blood fountained from the chest of one and the shoulder of the other who screamed like a wounded rabbit. The one left alive tried to crawl to freedom only to find himself being lifted to his feet by a gloved hand clutching his collar. He saw directly into the eyes of the masked man finding them a blank milky white. The voice spoke again. "Who is 'the Maestro'?"

"I can't..." the thug stammered, "He'll do worse than kill me. I seen it...I seen it...I can't tell!"

The masked man's silent gun coughed again and another bullet found its way into the terrified criminal's leg. The dapper gunman let him drop to the pavement gibbering in fear. "Tell this Maestro that I shall find him." He turned back to the woman who had fainted from fear and gathered her into his arms. A mist seemed to gather itself from nowhere and surround the two and then it dissipated leaving no trace of either the man or the woman. The bleeding thug was left alone with his dead companion to await discovery by the authorities.

II

John Chandler Brooks was a substantial man. Standing six foot four and weighing in at something over two-hundred and ninety pounds, he dominated any room that he happened to be in. At the moment, that room was his own kitchen. He had the honor, in his mind the dubious honor, of being the city's chief of police. It was a job that he took very seriously but somehow never learned to enjoy. Strange hours were the norm rather than the exception for him. His only consolation was that to him, it was better than the company of his wife who had well earned the reputation of a harridan. The early morning hours of this particular day found him on the telephone with the desk sergeant who holds down the night shift at the second precinct. "Sullivan, if you've been drinking...so help me... Whaddaya mean 'a guy in a tuxedo'?...One of the Maestro's guys dead?... So what, he didn't deserve it?!?...Yeah...Huh?...Red fez, what is that, some kind of bird?... A hat. So what?... I don't care that these guys got worked over! They're scum! With some luck those guys will wipe each other out and leave law abiding citizens to go about their business!...'Chilling laugh', I don't give a tinkers damn!... Its two in the blasted morning, Sully, and your worried about dead gangsters. Lookie, I'll talk to him in the morning. I said I'll talk to him in the morning!! I'll stop by the hospital lock up first thing....Yes I promise!! Jeez....O.K., I'll talk to ya tomorrow but I gotta get some sleep, o.k.?....Yeah, yeah... o.k., Goodnight." The big man scratched his head. "Red fez...Ree-dic-you-lus!"

Sleep did not come easily to chief Brooks that night. Sullivan's words and his sense of bewilderment were contagious enough that his brain could not slow down and Morpheus was kept at bay. Morning found Brooks in a foul

mood which came as no great surprise to his co-workers. The chief was regularly in such a state. The mountainous man strode into his office and slammed the rippled glass door behind him. Almost instantly the door swung open and his head once more emerged. "Get Sullivan on the horn!" he barked.

"He went off shift hours ago." said the operator. "He's bound. to be asleep by now!"

"I hope so." said Brooks with a grin.

The chief had spoken with the Maestro's heavy at the hospital without getting any better idea of what he thought he had seen. The man wouldn't talk at any length without a lawyer there and what he said didn't make any sense in the first place.

A foreign looking man wearing a tux with a mask and a red fez shot him and his pal with a silent gun and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Well, so far at least, this "Red Fez" was knocking off the right class of people. It turned out that the owner of "Downtown Charlie's" had refused to pass a split to the Maestro. The Maestro, in turn, had Charlie's girlfriend worked over to show him he meant business. This was calculated to make Charlie mad as a wet hen. The girl was the number one exotic dancer in the city but otherwise no one special. Charlie held onto her like property, didn't even like others looking unless it was for the expressed purpose of showing off what he had and they didn't. Brooks had heard that she was just a nice girl from corn country who deserved better. He hoped that the "Red Fez" wasn't some kind of screwball who would do God-knows-what with her.

III

The Teabury Museum of Ancient Cultures is in an out of the way part of the college campus mostly hidden from the street by trees. It is seldom visited by anyone save those so consumed with scholarship's demands that they are seldom seen anywhere else. These men, old or young, seem to be universally bent and bespectacled and have a closer knowledge of Mesopotamian farming methods than this morning's headlines. The museum's day to day operations, of which there are few, are overseen by Grant Gibson Ph.D.. This man, American by birth, was raised in the shadow of the Great Pyramids. He had been nurtured to manhood reading the sacred writings of millennia past so when his parents finally returned him to the land of his birth, the only life he was suited for was that of an academic. The private office of professor Gibson was filled with artifacts

from ages past the world over. By the door stood a basalt statue of Atum-Sen-Re dating from the second dynasty. Behind his desk was the great calendar wheel of the mysterious Maya. The paperweight on that desk was an axe-head lost by a Hittite warrior. Against the wall was a great sarcophagus of black stone inscribed in hieroglyphics with the name of Hero, the great Egypto-Roman engineer. The man himself was tall but didn't

look tall somehow. His unruly hair reflected a nature that cared little for the details of toilet. He was poring over a large and old leather-bound volume when he heard a soft voice in the distance. Rising from his chair he took a few steps over to the great stone coffin and touched it lightly in three places. Silently the cover slid to one side and he stepped in.

The vault opened into a room that was empty save for an actor's make up table and a tuxedo hanging by itself in a small closet. He sat at the table and with sure movements covered his face with dusky make-up. In a short time he had completed his ensemble with the dinner jacket, mask and pristine red fez. The man passed through a door into another larger room. A pretty young blonde woman sat on a cot and rose as he entered the room. She, having the resilience which accompanies vibrant youth, showed little after effects from the beating she had received the night before save for a few minor bruises.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

The man spoke now with a sepulchral tone. "I was occupied with the ancient studies."

"I need some food. I'm starving!"

"Mahmoud will bring you some soup soon." The girl did not fear this strange man, but she did wonder if he was truly human. She had heard him laugh once and had fervently prayed to God that she should never hear that sound again.

"You've kept me here in this little room for a whole day. When are you going to let me go?"

His blank white eyes met hers. "I need to know about the Maestro." He said.

Suddenly the girl appeared to be stricken with mortal fear. The desperate effort to bring her emotions under control was played out fully upon the battlefield of her countenance. "I don't know his real name, but I've seen him. I hate the way he looks at me and I hate the way he treats Charlie."

"What is his operation?"

"For Charlie, its protection. He has a big white slavery thing going, I hear. He has a few politicians. He has a lot of cops. Any opium in town he knows about. You want someone dead, he can take care of it for the right price."

The man in the fez stroked his chin. "For many years I have been in the east. When I came home, I found that lawlessness had taken over the city. I have sworn to show the forces of evil the power of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful.

"Have no fear, young lady, the Prophet has shown me the ancient techniques by which those who sneer at the path of righteousness may be educated to the ways of the light."

The man gestured in a strangely eastern way and suddenly stood across the room surrounded by a gathering mist. "I'm afraid that I must leave you again for a short while. When next you see me I shall return you to your home."

He waved his hand and vanished into the wall to the wide eyed stare of the girl. She gave a little cry and jump when a silent turbaned man in white placed a bowl of soup in front of her.

IV

Though the Great Depression held the country in an iron grip, one wouldn't know it from seeing the new and ornate structure which dominated the city's skyline. The Shelburn building was an imposing black edifice standing near the center of the city. It housed the stock exchange, the offices of numerous doctors and lawyers as well as a major department store on the ground floor. During the day it is the center of frenzied activities, at night all is dormancy. On this night there is a singular exception. At the darkened building's apex, a single window is lit, the private office of Raymond Shelburn, wealthy recluse. He lives his life in the busiest spot in the city, seeing all while himself never being seen.

To polite society he is known as the city's greatest benefactor and its society ladies and politicians put up with the man's many eccentricities in exchange for his favor. To the dark underside of the city's life he is known only by his works as the grand orchestrator of the only criminal organization in the region. Here, he is seen to have an altogether different face, one which is a mask of fiendish perversity and is referred to only in guarded whispers. Those who whisper call him the Maestro.

Shelburn paced the space behind his desk biting his lower lip. On the other side stand two large men looking uncomfortable.

"Where the devil are Lloyd and Carney? All they had to do was work over some little twist of a stripper. It was Charlie, I know it. If that guy won't play ball, o.k., then he's dead! I'm only doing this because I want to give him a chance with the organization. He's a pretty bright guy, I could've..." His tirade was interrupted by the ringing of the phone.

One of the other men picked it up. "Mister Shelburn's office...Clarence!" He looked up at the others with a stupid ear to ear grin. "Hey boss, Its Clarence!"

"Give me the phone, you moron," snapped Shelburn. He snatched the earpiece from the befuddled stooge who regarded the carpet penitently. "Lloyd, where in creation are you?!?...How did you end up in the hospital?....red fez?....."

V

It was the second time that day that Charlie Russell had shown up at the precinct house and the desk sergeant looked bored now, as well as annoyed.

"Lookie here, Mister Russell, I told you before that you would be the very first to know if anything turns up, but ya gotta unnerstand that we have other things to do besides look for your girlfriend."

"Listen," shouted Russell, "The Maestro had a hand in this. She could be dead!" Tears welled up in the man's eyes. "She didn't do anything to anybody.... they did it to her to get to me...please, can't you do something?" The man's plea would have touched the cop's heart if he had given a fig, but this was the twenty-second sob story he had had to listen to today and it was getting routine. Bringing up the Maestro was a creative twist, though. Just as the sergeant was about tell Russell to leave, Chief Brooks stalked in bringing his usual "good humor" with him along with a cloud of foul smelling smoke from a nickel cigar.

"Downtown Charlie," he sneered sarcastically, "its been a whole hour since

I saw you last. You don't come around nearly enough."

"Hey Chief," called Charlie, "what do these monkeys get paid for anyway, to sit around eating doughnuts all day long?

Annie's gone and that makes me look pretty bad. Now just what are you going to do about it?"

The Chief's face reddened and the desk sergeant shrunk down in his chair in preparation for the inevitable. The big man took two steps which placed him nose to nose with Downtown Charlie.

"I got an idea," he growled around the smelly cigar stub,
"why don't you ask the Red Fez? How about that Charlie?"
"What are you talking about? You think this is funny?"
"No joke, Charlie. Some joker in a red fez saved her from the Maestro's
boys and then made her like she was never there. You can take that as
gospel."
Charlie had a nervous half smile. "So who is this Red Fez guy?"
"I haven't got a clue, but if he doesn't like the Maestro, we have at least one
thing in common."

VI

Clarence Lloyd was having a great deal of trouble reading the newspaper in his hospital bed with one arm in a sling and one leg in traction. He cursed repeatedly as he struggled to fold the unruly journal when he heard a soft chuckle. He froze like a cinema image caught in its sprocket. With sweat on his upper lip he whispered to himself. "I've heard that laugh before..."

It was a voice choked with the dust of ages and the wisdom of the centuries which spoke to him. "Lloyd, tell me his name."

"Its you, ain't it!"

"I am he who laughs at midnight. I am he who preserves righteousness and punishes evil. Some now know me as the RED FEZ."

Lloyd cast his eyes all around the room but his mind was clouded and confused. "Where in Hades are you?!? What are you, some demon?"

Suddenly, inches from his own, were a pair of dead white eyes framed by a black mask. "His name, Lloyd...NOW."

"O.K., o.k.. Its Shelburn."

"Don't toy with me Clarence Lloyd! Raymond Shelburn is the city's leading citizen and its richest. He has no need of the wages of petty thievery."

"He's in it for power...and fun, he's crazy and he's gonna kill me for telling you his name!"

The blank eyes blinked and the room snapped into focus. Lloyd now saw the full figure of his interrogator from his polished shoes to the tassel on his immaculate red fez. "He won't kill you Clarence."

The stranger raised the gleaming .45 and pointed it directly between the terrified eyes of the bedridden thug. The gun burped softly.

VII

Grant Gibson shifted fitfully beneath the sheets. Sleep never came to

him swiftly and when it finally arrived it came filled with morbid visions. He dreamed constantly while asleep and could bring the world of dreams to his waking life. The mists of the dream world parted to reveal the Arabian desert of a half decade past to his tortured imagination.

In the near distance, dark men in robes coaxed camels to their feet as they growled and spat. Others, already mounted up urged their mounts into motion crying, "Hut-hut... Ai...ai...ai.." in the manner of their father's fathers hearkening back to ages long lost.

Although the caravan was leaving, Grant was staying behind so he could spend more time with the mullah. Mullah Ibrahim had promised to reveal to Grant the "Final Mystery", but only at the waning of the Moon. For two days he tended camels and got sunburn while he waited for the proper time.

On the third night, one of the servants told him that Mullah Ibrahim awaited him.

The mullah sat on a carpet in the center of the tent with a copy of the Q'ran open before him and he quoted. "In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful. Say: Allah is one, the Eternal God. He begot none, nor was He begotten. None is equal to Him." Grant repeated the words of the mullah, who then fell into fevered prayer. The high pitched sing-song of the Arabic adoration seemed to both permeate and emanate from the dusty canvas of the tent. Grant's mind was transfixed as the holy man swayed back and forth in ecstasy. The words heard by Grant slowly shifted from prayer to prophecy.

"Allah appointed a soldier of righteousness and called him Noah, and he bore away the righteous upon the water.

"Allah appointed a soldier of righteousness and called him Jesus, and he brought the love of Allah to mankind.

"Allah appointed a soldier of righteousness and made him the Prophet, and he brought the path of Islam to the world.

"Allah has appointed a thousand soldiers of righteousness to remove the stain of evil from the souls of men. These are the ones who laugh at midnight and each generation is given one out of Allah's compassion. You, Grant Gibson, are He Who Laughs at Midnight. You are a pure force against evil men who do wicked work in the world. Call upon the mystic ways of our sect whenever you see wickedness. You may bend minds away from awareness of your presence. You may call upon the mist of the djinn. You may speak with the voice of the ages and you may utilize the wisdom of the Prophet."

As the mullah spoke, a mist gathered around him and seemed to form itself into a tangible shape. The shape took human form and let forth with

a laugh that was terrifying in its chilling morbidity. The creature of mist still laughing leapt at Grant, flew into his nostrils, filled his lungs and the laugh now issued from his own throat...a mad, twisted parody of the human reaction to humor or gaiety. As he sat up in bed, drenched in cold sweat, Grant was still laughing like a crazed demon. Mahmoud burst into his room with a sleeping draught in hand. For him, this was an old routine.

VIII

A Japanese beetle green Hispano-Suiza with a silent Arab in white at the wheel pulled up in front of Downtown Charlie's. A single passenger was discharged, a lovely blonde wearing a flower print dress. She entered the little nightclub and saw Charlie at the bar with his back to the door.

"Charlie!" she called, "Charlie, its me Annie."

Russell whipped around wide eyed and tight lipped. "Where have you been hiding?" His face showed more anger than relief. His fists clenched and relaxed spasmodically. "I've got half a mind to..."

He was interrupted by the door swinging open and two broad shouldered men entering with drawn guns. One of the men, who would have been ugly even without the jagged scar that cut across his face, spoke. "We saw the skirt get left off by Ali Babba and we thought we should drop in to pay our respects."

Charlie walked over to the men. "Look...gentlemen, I've given it a lot of thought, and I have come to the conclusion that I have been being unreasonably selfish. Of course I'll share some of my business with the Maestro. How could I deny this man who has brought so much color to our...."

The gunman cut him off. "Too late for that Charlie. That Red Fez guy killed one of our boys. Put another in the hospital. The Maestro is very upset. He was willing to take a split, but you made that too expensive. Now you are going to give him the whole thing and you're gonna do it without an argument."

"The whole thing?" Cried Charlie, "But, I didn't have anything to do with the Red..." It was the last word he ever spoke, a bullet from the scarred man's gun punched a hole through his heart.

"I said 'no argument'." He turned to his partner and barked, "Put the nab on the dame, the Maestro wants to ask her a few things." So, within mere seconds of her entry to the club, the girl again was in the hands of the Maestro.

IX

The keeper at the City Zoo ape house whistled a merry tune as he hoisted the huge bucket of bananas to his shoulder. He had one more feeding and he could go home to the wife, relax before the radio and have a beer or two. Life was sweet. Unlocking the rear door to the first display cage he called, "O.K. Brutus, here's your din..." Brutus, the great silverback bull gorilla was not in evidence. The keeper looked left and right but saw not a sign of the huge anthropoid. He panicked. Unlocking cage after cage he found the same thing. No female gorilla, no orangutans, no chimpanzees. No sign of break in at all, just not an ape to be seen. The keeper's heart sank as he realized that it would be many hours before he would get home.

X

By the time that the clock in the church tower had concluded tolling the twelfth hour, a weird, eerily mirthless laugh filled the dank night. A fog had rolled in off the water so dense that it appeared like a river flowing through the almost empty city streets. The clock tower jutted up from the currents of vapor like a lighthouse at the edge of a boundless ocean. He from whom the chilling sound had emerged stood upon the ledge beside the clock surveying the streets below with not only his eyes but also with the ineffable prescient sense which was his stock and trade. The evil which hid in the shadows of the city was a bitter metallic taste in the back of his throat. He raised his head and let forth with a strange Arabic incantation. The mysteries of the djinns would have to be at his command this night. Below, at the strange surface of the fog, an eddy formed and rapidly became a potent vortex which cleared the streets of all obscurity. "Yes," he said, "I must let the clear air find its way into the heart wickedness." Somewhere, in the city's diseased heart, a chill was felt.

XI

Shelburn paused from grilling the blonde and shivered slightly. "Must be a draft." He muttered.

XII

Grant Gibson got in on the passenger side of the car and spoke a single

word. "Drive." The Hispano-Suiza was piloted with an easy grace by the dusky Arab. Unknown to his master, he found the chore of caring for this vehicle one of his life's greatest joys. Before he had been sent into the service of He who Laughs at Midnight, his life had had different priorities. His had been the life of a merchant trading in whatever goods he could sell at the highest price. He had told the agents for the Emir of Abu Dhan that he would provide first rate coffee for the great one and his guests. A better price was offered to him for the shipment at the last minute and he substituted second quality for the Emir. His agents treated him as they would have treated any liar. In the first weeks afterward, he wished that he had choked to death on the blood when they cut out his tongue rather than endure the shame of going through life thus marked. Mullah Ibrahim called him to his service after he had lived two years as a silent beggar. He was fearful at first when he saw his new master. Such a dire aspect to his every move and expression! Beard of the Prophet, he was fear itself embodied as a man! The strange American in the red fez assured him that he was no threat to him, only to those who were servants of evil. In that moment, he almost felt pity for those against whom he was the weapon.

The driver was interrupted in his wool-gathering by a curt order. "Mahmoud, stop the car, We are here." The car stood idling before the Shelburn Building. It was he who was known to the city as the "Red Fez" who emerged.

XIII

The average person would never mistake the face of the Maestro for that of Raymond Shelburn. Shelburn's face was that of a jovial pillar of the community. As the Maestro it was a mask of perversion and malignancy. The girl had no chance whatsoever of recognizing him. To her, he was just a monster. She made herself as small as possible in her chair as the Maestro stalked around the room waving his arms. "Charlie Russell's club was the last on my list. From now on not a single illicit dollar will change hands in this city without my owning a piece of it! The one potential problem might be the guy in the fez." Hearing this, the blonde spoke up on her own. "Mister...I think your going to be real sorry if you pick a fight with the Red Fez. He'll take care of you real good." The Maestro spun around and backhanded Annie viciously. "He's nothing! Understand? Nothing! I could care less about his parlor tricks, he's just another little wise guy who doesn't know who he's messing with. Let me tell you something, girlie, he's about to get himself an education. He's gonna have a college degree in what

happens when you play games with the Maestro!!"

One of the thugs helped the girl back to her feet. "That musta hurt." he said.

"A lot you care!" She snapped, snatching her hand from his. She turned upon the Maestro. "Yeah," she said, tears wetting her face which was crimson with anger, "go after the Red Fez, I want to see what happens!"

The malignant mastermind regarded her with a sly smile and said, "You're going to get your wish, little lady."

XIX

He who was known as the Red Fez had become one with the shadows which fell across the lobby of the Shelburn building. The hour was late and none were present save the guard at the security desk. That man had been "convinced" that he saw no living soul. He gathered around himself the obscuring mist of the djinn and continued through the building as a seeming part of the background. He drew the .45 holding it close by his chest. As he came to a corner, a huge, hair covered hand reached out to snatch the gun from his hand. He who Laughs was unused to being surprised in this manner and was off balance for just an instant. Just an instant too long. A gigantic fist hammered into the side of his head and he went down to his knees. The Red Fez looked up dazedly to find himself face to face with a savage monster, a roaring, foul smelling parody of humanity. Too slowly, it registered in his mind that it was a huge bull gorilla. This primitive creature had far too simple a mind for him to effect with his powers. To this hair covered beast, there was no world of suggestion or ideas, only the literal world shown to his tiny brain by the senses. The gun lay at the hulking ape's feet, he had only to reach it to even the odds. As his senses cleared, he became more aware of the doings in the room. Everywhere he cast his eyes he saw the poor relations of mankind, swinging from the lighting or shambling in the corners doing unspeakable things to each other and to themselves. These were psychologically far removed from their wild cousins in the jungle who were gentle beings. They could only be zoo or circus animals who had nurtured a grudge against their jailers and tormentors for many years. By virtue of his humanity, he was in grave danger. Before he had reclaimed his faculties, he felt his arms seized and bent painfully behind him. Four chimpanzees were gleefully screaming in his ears, dragging him through a doorway. One of them had his gun and had randomly killed one of his fellows before he struck the Red Fez into unconsciousness with the butt.

XX

The limped blue eyes of Annie swam into view as the world became once more a solid reality. She shied away as he focused on her. "Your eyes," she said, "they looked kind of regular when you were out, but they just turned white and milky like. Just like that!"

"They are only this color when I am a vessel of Allah."

"Look, Mister... you got to get up. He's got monkeys everywhere. He's just plain nuts and he's going to kill everyone!" He and the girl occupied a circle of light cast from above in an otherwise darkened room.

Beyond the circle of light lurked shadowy beasts softly chittering to each other in some eldritch night language. Shouldering himself through the hirsute crowd was a large man. He entered the light with a chimpanzee and an orangutan flanking him. "The Red Fez." He said as the masked man regained his feet. "I am chosen by Allah as He who Laughs at Midnight."

"I suppose that that remains to be seen, for the hour is near. Personally, I doubt that you shall live to see it." The two malodorous apes hugged their vile master. He regarded them with a fond eye. "They love me, you know." He said nodding in their direction. "We mutually respect each other's savagery, the desire to wield power over others for its own sake. We both kill for pleasure."

"You take from Allah what belongs only to Allah, power over life and death. "The Red Fez now stood erect and defiant as he finally faced the Maestro. "You would steal the very soul of this city were I not here to stop you, and you should know that I will stop you." The voice came from all parts of the room at once and it made the apes gibber nervously. The Maestro leered at the girl. The chimp and the orang responded as if they knew his very thoughts. He said, "After I have taken care of you, my masked friend, it will be my pleasure to watch my associates take their pleasure with the young lady. Did you know that they crave human women? For years they have seen them make merry as they have passed before their cages. Now they will be satisfied with no less than the pleasure of their flesh. Think about that as you die, Red Fez."

The young woman cowered behind the messenger of the Prophet and wept softly. She was unlucky enough to have an excellent imagination. In her mind, she already felt the simian touch of the beasts, their voluptuary avarice. She was certain that she would pass out from the experience and fervently hoped that it would happen soon enough. The chimp at the Maestro's side held the .45 that he had captured from the avenger of evil

and waved it over its head, grinning stupidly. The Maestro chuckled maliciously. "My under evolved friend seems to enjoy your weapon, but I have to take it away from him before he does any more damage with it. Perhaps you would like it back?" The Red Fez stood silently, blank white eyes staring from the black mask. He needed his gun to properly defend the girl and was wracking his brain for a way to get it. The man who arrogantly referred to himself as the Maestro continued to gloat, now paying little attention to his captive audience, he was held deeply in the thrall of his own monologue. During a brief moment in which he happened to focus on the Red Fez, he saw that he had his gun back and was aiming it between his eyes. For an instant he was startled and jumped, flailing his arms. The chimp at his side shrieked and let go of the real .45 allowing the captive to jump for and recover the weapon. The illusion had fooled the Maestro just long enough to make him start and panic the ape into dropping the gun. The Red Fez now brandished the .45 as he started to back out of the room with the blonde held tightly at his side when suddenly his arms were pinned to his sides with an indescribable force. Huge hairy arms were wrapped about his torso and he realized his grave mistake. He had forgotten about the gorilla.

He squeezed the trigger of the gun and invoked the name of Allah. The thumb-like great toe of the ape was blown free of the creature's foot and the monster let loose a hellish bellow directly into the ear of the Red Fez as he let him go. The Maestro called to the suffering ape but it served only to direct its attention toward him and away from the Red Fez. The two creatures at his sides, caught in the madness of the moment tightened their grip on his arms keeping him from leaving the room. The masked man was tossed aside as the great anthropoid jumped toward him in ever building rage and pain. Spying the girl, the Red Fez seized her hand and dragged her from the room, but not before her eyes witnessed the horrible vision of the Maestro being literally torn limb from limb by the crazed animal as the others looked on leaping and screaming. Surely, even the demons of hell were never so savage in their bloodlust as were these hairy sub humans with their overpowering hatred for mankind. The last thing that the, now horribly maimed criminal heard as he passed from this world was an eerie laugh in the distance as the city hall clock struck twelve.

XXI

Gibson relaxed in his cluttered office with a glass of scotch and an Egyptian oval cigarette. For an instant, it seemed that the curling smoke

formed the shape of a killer ape as it rose toward the ceiling, but the shape was quickly dispersed when the professor started chuckling at some private jest. Without conscious volition the gentle chuckle evolved into a haunting, full-throated laugh with overtones of insanity. Outside the museum, a gardener heard just a slight echo of the sound and shuddered.

I really enjoyed writing this story, but almost no one I showed it to around the time it was written seemed to get it. I suppose that stories involving time travel are frequently like that, then again, maybe it just stinks. Either way, it was still a lot of fun for me.

Rocky and Bullwinkle fans may recognize a couple of familiar names.

Kevin

It lay there by the side of the road, a wrecked and smoking cultural cliché.

Until A few seconds before, it had been a smooth unbroken silvery lens-shaped object that had suddenly come crashing through the trees, swooped over the top of the truck, and impacted just past the left shoulder with a loud crunching thud.

Randy turned to Jeff bug-eyed. "Shee-it! Did you see that?!?"

"Damn tootin'!" Said Jeff. He pulled the big flat bed over to the side and brought it to a stop some hundred yards ahead of the wreck.

By the time they had run back to the saucer, one of the occupants was all ready crawling from it. Paradoxically, they were surprised to see that the creature was exactly what they expected. It was humanoid, nude and about the size and build of a seven year old child. The head was huge in proportion to its size and its skin was a light greenish gray color. It had no hair, fingernails or genitalia. Its nose was merely two small openings on its flat face. Their large ears didn't come to "Vulcan" style points and as a result looked slightly wrong on these otherwise typical "little green men".

As a second being emerged from the wreckage the first looked up at the two truckers displaying huge glossy black eyes and then collapsed, unconscious at their feet.

It took them about an hour to winch the saucer up onto the bed of the truck. The vehicle was only about the size of a large automobile, but its sides were virtually frictionless making it hard for ropes to hold it in place. They knew that they would need it if they wanted anyone to believe the story and if they were foolish enough to tell it.

The two "space men" were stuck sitting in the back bunk of the sixteen-wheeler. They didn't make any sound but they seemed to be uninjured, just a little shook up. Jeff and Randy were slightly spooked by their oily looking, inexpressive faces.

After a while one leaned a little closer to the other and started to whisper something in a language that Jeff couldn't understand when he attempted to eavesdrop. One of the creatures noticed him listening and replaced the articulate sounds he was making with ever-so-slightly louder "meep-meep-meep" noises. It was apparent to Jeff and Randy that they used sound to communicate. That much they seemed to have in common with the humans.

"What'n hell are they sayin'?" asked Randy.

"I dunno. Isn't English."

"Huh...that's funny."

"Why'zat funny?"

"Ask 'em something. Anything."

Jeff turned around and said to the creature on the right. "Where do you come from?" He asked.

The creature looked at him blankly and then fluttered his hands helplessly. "Meep, meep, meep!" He said.

Jeff said to Randy, "He said 'meep, meep, meep'."

Randy stroked his jaw thoughtfully. He was an intelligent, educated man, but most people didn't assume he was because of his appearance. It seemed to be commonly thought that big men who were long distance truckers never read a book.

"Jeff, lemme ask you something. Would you go to France without so much as a Berlitz phrase book?"

"Sure. I speak pretty good French."

He rolled his eyes. "O.K., China then."

"Nope. Not if I wanted to get food or a place to stay. Not if I was smart."

"So how smart to you think these guys are?"

Enlightenment filled Jeff's features. He turned around to the saucer man once more. "You lil' fellers had me goin' there for a second. Now spit it out, where'n heck are you from?"

"Meep!" Exclaimed the creature.

Randy called back from the driver's seat. "That ain't gonna fly buddy! Start talkin'!"

The saucer-men looked somewhat cowed. They conferred briefly in the original language they had been using and then the one on the left said distinctly the single word, "Luna".

"Luna?" said Jeff.

"Luna?" Inquired Randy.

"Th'guy said 'Luna'." Replied Jeff.

"'Luna', as in the Moon?"

"That's what I'm gettin'."

"The Moon? Get real!" said Randy. "The Moon is uninhabited, a dry, gray, dusty rock."

They didn't get another word out of them until after they got them back to Randy's house.

Randy lived in a small house on a large parcel of land just south of Greenfield, Massachusetts. Most of the time, his wife, Sandy had the place to herself while Randy hauled loads back and forth across the country. Perhaps they owed the durability of their marriage to the fact that they only saw one another for a few days out of any given month. The little quirks that tend to drive people who live together crazy never really got a chance to get under their skin. As it was, after twenty-one years, they were still like honeymooners.

Sandy was a plump and comely woman who resembled the classic image of the farmer's wife. She fulfilled that stereotype to some extent in that she was a fine cook and a meticulous housekeeper, but she was also a noted author and illustrator children's books, particularly the famous "Magic Marvin Moskowitz" series. Not having her husband underfoot all the time allowed her to work as much as she needed to and have plenty of time for Randy when he was around.

She handled her introduction to the saucer-men with aplomb. Randy had brought home lots of strange guests over the years, perhaps not as strange as these, but close.

They refused to touch the wonderful beef stew that Sandy made.

"Maybe they're vegetarian." Speculated Jeff.

One of the creatures spoke up. "We do not eat." It said in academically perfect English.

"But you can talk if you want to." Said Randy. "Why don't you tell us where you came from?"

"The Moon." said the creature.

"Nobody lives on the Moon."

"Not at this time."

Randy raised his eyebrow. "Someone *used* to live on the Moon?"

"No. Someone *will* live on the Moon."

The three humans were silent. Finally Sandy asked, "Did you come from the future?" Under normal circumstances, the average person wouldn't even ask that kind of question, but who knew what these beings were capable of.

Sandy was the first one to bother to ask their names.

"I am Arvid Gidney. My associate is Otas Cloyd. We are from a period of time some twenty-seven thousand years in your future. We are human beings much the same type as yourselves."

Randy looked skeptical. "How could human beings have evolved so much in so little time? Your cranium is half again as large as mine. You have no *sex*, ferchistsake."

The one called Cloyd tried to answer. "If some 'Numb Douglas' loaded you for forty cans of 'cooked' air, you might have a reason to pass on our figs and flies."

Again, the three humans were left with blank faces.

Gidney appeared to roll his eyes, but it was difficult to tell because of their uniform onyx black. "That's remarkable nineties vernacular, Cloyd, wrong century, though." The creature sighed slightly. "What my associate is trying to say is that you are making assumptions about things that you cannot possibly understand. These bodies you see are not our real selves. Humans can't travel through time except by dangerous, brute force methods, and even then only a few centuries. What we do isn't exactly time travel. We can open up the timeline from another dimension, you could think of it as looking at eternity sideways. It would cause us damage to place ourselves back in time from that direction, so we use a *hobbit* instead. Actually, we create it in the place and time it is needed."

"A 'hobbit'?" said Randy.

"That's what this is called. It's a remote mechanism. An....um...."

"Android." Said Cloyd.

"Yes! An *android*." He pointed to his enlarged skull. "Up here there is no brain. There is only the dimensional linkage mechanism that communicates with my brain back home and a supply of nutrient for the hobbit. When the nutrient is used up, the hobbit dies. If the hobbit is harmed, it causes no harm to me personally, but if it sustains too much pain or is killed, I just find myself back home in the 290th century with a bit of a hangover."

"You really call it the 290th century?" Asked Jeff.

"Are you shitin' me?" Said Cloyd.

"Much better use of vernacular!" Congratulated Gidney.

Cloyd continued. "We don't use any single system of dates. There are a number of "local" systems that are used in relation to a particular period of time. The one called "Christian dating" only covers a period of a little under three thousand years. It's actually one of the longer periods of consistent time keeping of the First Era."

Randy stroked his chin as he digested that particular tidbit. Up until a month before, Randy had worn a beard, but had shaved it on a whim. The stroking habit had remained, though. "How long a period of time is the "First Era"?" He asked.

"Twelve thousand years, more or less. Your lives take place right about in the middle of it. The first, and longest period, like you, we refer to as the *ancient period*. We also maintain the names *late antiquity* and *medieval* for the short periods which follow in spite of their linkage with a particular culture. The period which comes after that, and includes your present times, your historians call *modern*, but we divide it into several shorter periods called *first expansion*, *colonial*, *pre-industrial*, *industrial*, *information*, *first Solar*, *first decadent*, *new agrarian* and *insular*. These periods cover the Christian years 1490 through 3150. This current year is in the transition between the *industrial* and the *information* periods. The first Solar War ended the *insular* period and opened the *new colonial* period which inevitably gave way to the *first empire* period which persisted for some six hundred years until Stamwate came along and set up the republic which paved the way for the *second empire* period and then the *trans stellar* period. During the Second Empire, people started dating time from the foundation of the First Empire. The existence of the First Empire, the Republic and the Second Empire covered some twenty-five-hundred years. The *new insular* period followed with all of its complexities and then the *rediscovery*. The *unification* came in three distinct periods of about three hundred years each and each one associated with a different person called the *Rensons*, *Volnart* and *Jingu* periods respectively. The *confederation* emerged and became the most durable political entity of the First Era, uniting all humanity with a single economic base. After it sunk into decadence, nations within it started to insist on the right to free exchange and ultimately caused the Confederation's collapse. It was the *disolution* period following the exchange crisis and the ensuing wars, which brought the First Era to a close around 11230 ad."

Gidney once again rolled his eyes. "Cloyd is a historian. Please forgive his longwinded outbursts of pedantry."

The three remained perplexed. Sandy finally spoke, asking Gidney, "That's just the *first* era?"

"Cloyd and I live in the Third Era." Said Gidney.

"On the Moon." Said Jeff.

"On the Moon." Replied Gidney "It's a paradise, I assure you."

Randy stroked his chin perplexedly. "Aren't you screwing up by telling us this? Does this mean you have to kill us now?" He tried not to let any of his actual nervousness show in his voice.

Gidney actually sputtered. "Do you think we are monsters?" His expression revealed that he was deeply insulted by the notion.

Cloyd signaled to him to calm down. "No, we do not have to kill you, nor will we 'wipe your memory'." Here he made quote signs in the air with his fingers. "You helped us out and we have a mission to complete. Furthermore, you could be of great assistance to us."

"May I use your computer?" asked Gidney.

The sudden change of subject took Randy by surprise. "Um...sure, why not?"

Cloyd hung over Gidney's shoulder as he rapidly punched keys. The modem sputtered and a website came up, but the humans couldn't see because the monitor was blocked by the huge heads of the Moon men. They quickly logged off.

"It's him alright." Said Cloyd.

"And who exactly is 'him'?" Asked Sandy.

"Kevin." Cloyd explained uninformatively.

"We need to get to New York City." Said Gidney. "We can pay you if you help us."

"You have money?"

"We can get it if we need to."

"New York City. I'm not sure I understand." Said Randy.

"What's to understand, Randy? They want t'go to the 'Big Apple'." Said Jeff. "Duh." He added.

"You *are* in the transport business, are you not?" Said Cloyd.

Randy looked across the table to Sandy. "It bother you if I take these guys to New York?" He asked between mouthfuls of stew.

"You mean you're not taking me?"

Randy smiled. "Wouldn't dream of leaving you behind."

Sandy beamed. "Damn right, you wouldn't. I'm driving."

It turned out that the "Moon men" didn't sleep as well as didn't eat. They sat in the living room all night jabbering in three or four different languages, none of them English.

In the morning, the five assorted beings went out and pulled the tarp off of the damaged saucer. Jeff ran his hands along the inside of one of the large holes in the side. The broken surface had a stony sort of feel. "Is this thing made of pottery?" He asked.

“I’m not sure.” Said Gidney. “The craft is created using available substances in the era it is needed. Many of them end up being made of some sort of ceramic composite, others of metal, plastic, stone or grown from organic components. Usually a combination of all those things. The genetic information of plants and animals can be altered to induce them to create very complex objects. This particular craft was produced by a coral reef.”

The inside of the saucer appeared to be cramped, but comfortable. Interestingly, most of the hull was transparent from the inside even though it was totally reflective from the outside. There were two seats that appeared to be some sort of plastic and what was apparently a control panel that had the look of crab shell. It had a large crack in it with smelly fluid leaking from it.

“The guidance is dead.” Said Cloyd. “The craft is useless.”

Gidney responded with a resigned look. “Alright, lets get rid of it, then.”

“Woah!” Said Randy. “Before you do that, I’d sure like to get a look at the engine!”

“It doesn’t have one.” Responded Cloyd. “Think of this vehicle as just a cabin attached to a sort of pointing device. The control and power for it reside back home, this is just the part that moves.”

“Like a cable car.” Said Sandy.

“More or less.” Replied Cloyd. “But without the sensory guidance device, It’s kind of like a brain, it can’t tell the control where it needs to go.”

He touched a sequence of rubbery protrusions on one section of the inner hull and then stepped out of the saucer. The hull started to collapse like a week old jack-o-lantern. Within an hour, it was little more than a foul-smelling puddle of goo. Randy really wished that it had been taken off the flat-bed before they had done that.

Sandy watched the disintegration of the craft with bemusement. “I can barely imagine the science that created that.”

Both Gidney and Cloyd suppressed laughter. Gidney was the first to speak. “*Science* didn’t play a role in its creation. We have behind us five times as much history as you people do. In that time, some very basic discoveries have emerged. Just as your people have completely overturned many, nay, *most* of what your remote ancestors held as unshakeable truth about the universe, the people of our age and the many generations that led to us, have done likewise several times over. The concept of ‘science’ seems as quaint to us as the concept of wizardry must to you, actually more so. We have an orderly method for understanding the universe and applying that knowledge to better our lives, but it doesn’t work like your science.”

Sandy’s interest was peaked. “Really! Tell me about it.”

“Well, instead of using controlled experiment to deduce....”

“Gidney!” Said Cloyd sharply. “Letting out the occasional historical specific is one thing, but an entire epistemology is quite another! Do you *really* want to advance the chain of discovery by fifty centuries in a single breath?”

An alarmed expression crossed Gidney’s features. “Um, let’s talk about something else.” He muttered.

By ten am, they had all piled into Sandy’s Pathfinder and hit the road for New York.

Sandy had attempted to disguise the saucer men with makeup and sunglasses. No hat could be found to fit them, so she fixed them up with hooded sweatshirts. They were also given shorts. There was no way that they were not going to attract attention, but now at least they resembled burn victims rather than aliens. Hydrocephalic burn victims. The humans decided to just keep them mostly out of sight.

The first thing Randy had asked when they set off was “Who is ‘Kevin’?”

Cloyd replied, “Kevin is a *simulant*. To be more specific, he is the *first* simulant, although he is in a very early version right now.”

“Pray tell, what the heck is a simuloid?”

“*Simulant*.”

“Whatever. What the hell is it?”

In response, Cloyd quoted the entirety of a *Scientific American* article on the birth of simulants that dated from some ten years in the future. This was one of the very strange things about the saucermen. One frequently (but by no means always) got the impression that many of their responses were carefully prepared, as if they had a lot of time to consider the answer to a question. When asked about it, they explained that they didn’t communicate with us in real time. They were capable of stepping back from their residence in the hobbit to research an answer or an action and then pick up at the same instant that they had left off. This was also responsible for their sometime displays of remarkable reflexes and dexterity. It was strange for the humans to realize how uneven the ground they stood upon was.

A simulant, it turns out, is what we would call an artificial intelligence. This particular one called Kevin was pretty advanced by early twenty-first century standards in being able to use quite a bit of abstract thought and creative reasoning. Kevin was the program used to run an Internet search engine called “Kevin-Sez.com”. Kevin could then speak in real time to the user via an “avatar” that resembled a freckle-faced ten-year-old boy in overalls. He could interact with up to a hundred customers at a time. It sounded pretty fancy, but hardly the stuff for beings from the distant future to get all exercised over.

"I don't get it." Said Randy. "Why is this Kevin so important?"

"He will mature into a very important person."

"Person? I thought you said Kevin was a program."

Jeff spoke up. "Randy, *you're* a program. We all are programs, we just use different types of hardware to run on." Jeff didn't seem too sharp most of the time, but he read an awful lot of science fiction, comic books and other things of that ilk and was well versed in a number of exotic concepts.

Gidney said. "In the early twenty second century, simulants acquired rights comparable to human beings. Some of them even built artificial human shaped bodies so they could be active in the human community. Most of them didn't, though. Their lives are lived at a much faster rate than ours. A day spent living at human speed could cause a simulant to fall behind by the equivalent of several months in his own culture. It would be like you had been marooned on an island for a year and then came back to pick up your life where you had left off."

"So simulants are people, then."

"Yes. Several kinds of beings are considered persons in our society. There are humans and simulants, of course, then there are autons, cetans, anamids, kweeds, antibiotics..."

"What the hell are those?" Asked Randy.

"It would be too difficult to explain, suffice it to say, Kevin is the most important, most influential person of the First Age."

"Really, more so than Jesus or Mohammed?"

"More so than them or Gengis Khan, Augustus Caesar, Gandhi, Christopher Columbus, Eduard Bucco, Thomas Edison, Einstein..."

Randy interrupted. "Eduard who?"

Gidney nudged Cloyd and arched a hairless eyebrow in his direction. Cloyd looked a little embarrassed. "I guess he's still 'waiting in the wings', as it were. The point is that Kevin will ultimately wield more historic influence than any of them. He is still alive in our own age. Simulants can live as long as their electronic environment persists or if they are in storage."

Sandy, Jeff and Randy took their time visualizing a life that lengthy.

In Springfield, they stopped to gas up. The station was mostly self-service with a single bored looking young guy minding the store. He had large plugs through his ears and pierced lips and eyebrows with small dumbbell shaped devices in the holes. Tattoos in a vaguely Indonesian style crawled up both of his arms.

Jeff was smiling as he walked back from paying the kid. "I swear to God, I have never seen someone who had done so much *stuff* to himself! Not even when I was in the navy."

Cloyd looked at him and said. "In my time, some people carry considerably more advanced body modification than that. A few of them you might not recognize as even belonging to your own species."

Jeff's smile vanished. "Like what?" He asked.

"Patterned skin, unusual hair colors,..."

"That doesn't sound too weird."

"...extra limbs, alternative sensory organs, alternative sex organs, removable parts, built in clothing, brain extensions and a number of other things more difficult to explain."

"...oh... Yeah, well some of that does sound kind of strange." Jeff paused and looked hard at Cloyd. "Do *you* have anything like that? On your *real* body, I mean."

Cloyd grinned. "Sure! I have three heads and bat wings!"

Everyone in the car looked silently abashed.

"I'm kidding!" Said Cloyd. "You people are *so* gullible!"

Jeff blushed slightly. "Well, how the hell am I supposed to know? You guys travel through time wearing tiny robot bodies. As far as we know, anything's possible."

"Possible, certainly, but I would like to think I have better *taste* than that."

The saucer men were impatient to reach New York and heaved deep sighs every time they stopped so the humans could eat or use the toilet.

"Our time is limited." Gidney pointed out.

"I don't get it." Said Randy, "Is something going to happen at a specific time?"

"No, not really. Our window for action is fairly broad, but the lifetime of a hobbit is short. We need to accomplish our mission within the next twelve hours." They were still an hour outside of New York.

Sandy stepped on the gas.

It was a Tuesday and parking in Manhattan was nearly impossible, but they finally found a spot only six blocks from their destination, which proved to be a small fourth floor office on Clinton Street, the office of Kevin-Sez.com.

Randy turned to the back seat where Gidney and Cloyd peered out from beneath their hoods. They both looked nervous. "What happens now?"

Cloyd said. "We must go up to the office."

"*She* will be there!" Said Gidney. He was actually shivering.

"I *know*! But we must face her. She is just a human being, and has no idea of what she has brought into the world."

The two decided that we had to go with them to provide some sort of cover and help their appearance to be less of a shock. They had originally

planned to render the occupants of the office harmlessly unconscious for a few minutes, but all of that equipment was lost with the saucer. Now they would have to take another approach.

Randy said, "Now, explain to me why you need to go here, please."

"We need to obtain a copy of Kevin's original ego, the core of what he was. Currently, Kevin is a reconstruction, albeit a very good one, of his former self. He has employed us to retrieve a copy of his original code. Like a human being, he wishes to recapture his childhood."

"Why didn't he come himself?" Asked Sandy

Gidney chuckled. "He is quite busy. This is a personal indulgence, nothing of great import hangs on this save for his own satisfaction."

"*Personal indulgence.*" Muttered Randy. "Sheesh."

"How are you gonna do that?" Asked Jeff.

"We need to obtain the cooperation of Kevin's creator."

"Is that person here?" Asked Sandy.

"LaShonda Dawson." Said Gidney and Cloyd in chorus. There was a tone of deep reverence.

"She must be." Said Gidney, "She is chief software engineer."

They found the building with little trouble. A directory in the lobby indicated that the office of 'Kevin-Sez.com' was on the third, not the fourth floor.

The Moon Men insisted that they remove their makeup and, what they considered ridiculous, clothing. After a few moments in the men's room, they had restored themselves to the appearance they had upon meeting Randy and Jeff. They were certain that they would be better received with their normal appearance. Cloyd retained the rubber sandals and sunglasses for reasons he chose not to explain. It gave him the look of a small sexless nudist at the beach. Gidney who was truly *au natural* somehow looked less naked.

They decided that Sandy would go in first and locate Ms. Dawson before they introduced the saucermen. She was the least threatening and/or strange of the group.

She entered the office and those outside heard muttered voices for a few short moments and then she emerged. "She is right out front." Said Sandy. The remaining four entered. There were only two people in the small office that was dominated by several desktop computers and one larger computer on the floor near the back, the server, no doubt. There was a young man with longish, unkempt hair wearing jeans and a "Phish" t-shirt. His eyes bugged out when he saw the Moon Men. "Whoah..." He intoned softly.

Standing by a desk covered with papers as well as both a laptop and a desktop computer was the woman they sought. She was no older than twenty-five and quite attractive with a striking figure and expressive brown eyes. Her hair was done into a multitude of tight braids that fell below her shoulders. Randy didn't want to examine her too closely because he knew that Sandy was looking straight at him. Jeff, on the other hand took his time appreciating her charms.

She stared Jeff down and said, "May I help you?"

Randy elbowed Jeff to get him to stop devouring her with his eyes and said, "Our friends need to talk to you." He indicated Gidney and Cloyd.

The woman looked over the two little grayish green men and raised an eyebrow. "Is this some sort of advertising promotion? We really don't have the disposable cash to afford anything like that. They are really well done though."

Gidney spoke. "We don't want to sell you anything LaShonda Dawson."

Her male co-worker said. "That is amazing makeup, man. It's as good as anything in the movies."

"I'm not in disguise," Said Gidney, "and neither is my associate. I am Arvid Gidney and this is Otas Cloyd. We would like to meet Kevin."

The fellow in the t-shirt spoke up. "*I'm* Kevin, guy." His speech was punctuated with soft clicks caused by an ornament that pierced his tongue striking his teeth. "You're not going to probe my butt-hole, are you?"

A rictus of disgust briefly twisted Gidney's features. "Not today. You are Kevin Shea, the graphic designer who created the avatar and voice for Kevin, it's a pleasure to meet you, but we came to see *that* Kevin." He pointed at the server.

LaShonda said, "You guys aren't making a bit of sense. You want to speak with our software?"

"We would like to obtain a copy."

The woman's eyes narrowed. "I'm afraid that I can't help you." She said crisply. "That software is proprietary. It is the basis of my business."

Cloyd whispered in Gidney's ear and the other smiled and nodded. "We can offer a fair exchange." Said Cloyd.

LaShonda's face registered enlightenment. Now she thought she knew what this was all about. "Don't you think it's a little early in our operation to attempt to buy us? We just started up two months ago."

"We don't want to take control of your company, but we would be interested in investing, a silent partnership, but we would require a copy of the software."

“Would you be willing to agree not to use it in any way that would compete with *Kevin-Sez*? Are these gentlemen with you lawyers?” She was clearly certain that they were not.

Cloyd reached into the air before him and pulled a small brick shaped object seemingly from nowhere. The eyes of everyone else, save for Gidney, bugged out. The object came out of a place that was at right angles to *everything*. “This is a replacement microprocessor for your server. It is fifty times faster than anything that will be on the market for at least two years, but your operating system will be able to cope with it. It will give a huge boost in Kevin’s ability to react in real time and allow him to really converse with your customers. Believe me when I say people will notice. By the time market technology catches up, you will be well established as the clear leader in your field. You will also make a *lot* of money.

They required a demonstration, of course, but a few minutes with the new processor installed on one of the desktop computers proved that the saucermen knew of what they spoke, at least enough to make the trade worthwhile to LaShonda Dawson.

There was, of course, more conversation, but ultimately the Moon men walked out of the office with two CD-ROMs that contained the essence of Kevin. With an odd motion, the CDs were made to vanish into the place from which the processor had appeared.

Before they even were out of Manhattan, Cloyd died and swiftly disintegrated into a nasty-smelling mess in the back seat, ruining the upholstery. Gidney did the same thing a half hour later, but having given warning, it took place outside the car on the shoulder of route 684. Before he was gone, he assured them that payment for their services would be awaiting them at home. Randy used a snow shovel from back to scrape the worst of Cloyd out of the SUV and then the remains of both into a ditch. The stuff had already started to draw flies as they drove away.

They explained to the revolted carwash guy that teenagers had taken a joyride in the SUV and gotten drunk and sick in it. It was five more hours before they finally returned to Randy’s place.

On the kitchen counter was a large, dense knot of caterpillars; their rear-ends were busily spinning out silk. Upon close examination, they saw that there were also several wasps chewing paper pulp from supermarket flyers. Slowly they were creating banknotes. One hundred dollar bills. *Many* one-hundred dollar bills. Jeff, Randy and Sandy just left them alone. Over the next few days, birds brought them leaves and waste paper through an open window until they had created a half-million dollars. The caterpillars died, the wasps flew away. The birds came no more.

The bills, each with unique serial numbers, were accepted by the bank without difficulty, but most went into a safety deposit box to keep the taxman at bay.

Jeff and Randy started their own shipping company and became very successful, but Randy sold out to Jeff when Sandy got a movie deal for “Magic Marvin Moskowitz and the Moon Men.”

I had to think really hard to remember how I got the idea for this story. There was a butcher shop in Somerville, Massachusetts called Mr. Meat. I remember thinking it would be a great name for a porn actor. At some point in the early '80's my friend, the late Jay TenHove, wanted to make a short film called "Murder me, Mr. Meat", but it never got past the title stage.

My friend Terry Franklin and I when we were teenagers once concocted the idea of creating a fake corpse made by attaching cuts of meat to a human skeleton. We never attempted to actually do it.

Once I met a college kid who was at a stage in his life where his entire focus was pulling strange and often dangerous pranks with his friends. I won't name him as he may still have a trial or two pending.

Mister Meat

I

It was eight-thirty Wednesday evening and Howie Berg was immersed in the Talmud when he heard the noise. It was soft at first, barely distracting him from the ancient wisdom. In a short time it grew to a loud hissing sound like the release of gas under pressure. He looked out of his dorm room window. He had to blink his eyes before he could accept what they saw.

A volcano appeared to have sprouted from nowhere in the center of the Davidson quad. Flame and smoke were pouring from a hole in the ground which was surrounded by a growing cone of ash and cinders.

A couple of girls started screaming and everyone was running from the scene.

Howie ran out into the quad just as the fire engine arrived. By that time the cone was some ten feet high and still growing.

The first fireman on the scene sniffed the air and a look of disgust crossed his features. He signaled to his colleagues and soon a stream of water was falling on the apex of the cone.

"Now this is an impressive display of foolishness." Thought Howie. Indeed, trying to douse a volcano with water surely would be, but the fire and smoke slowed and stopped as ash washed in black water over everything staining the lawn and walk. The spray spotted Howie's glasses.

From the shrinking mound of ash was washed a simple looking device made from a clock, a battery and some duct tape.

"Those guys!" muttered Howie. He reached back and straightened his tiny yarmulke which was secured with two bobby pins and stalked back to his room. "Someone needs to teach them a lesson." He turned his eyes upward.

The fireman reached down and picked up the now sodden and ash soiled contrivance and was showing it to the chief. "It was a small clock and a six volt battery rigged up with a model rocket igniter. That's what set off the flammable substance."

The chief asked, "What was the substance?"

II

"Like a bazillion of those snake fireworks ground up into a powder! It was about two hundred dollars worth of 'em!" Crowed Sparmy.

"You are the MAN!" said Char.

"You're gonna get caught this time." Said Nick, "Someone will remember you buying that much of 'em."

"Uh-uh! Bought 'em out of state in small bunches over the last two years. I was saving them up for just such an occasion! Gimmie another brewski.

It was the weekly Thursday night beer bash, not to be confused with the weekly Saturday night beer bash or the weekly Friday night beer bash.

Char, Nick and "Sparmy" were the last awake and, coincidentally the least concerned of the house about being in class the next morning.

In the beer can littered common room of the frat house, the conversation turned to stranger things than usual. The thing that always seemed to come to the fore were ways to "flip out" their fellow students and the administration of the school. The pranks had rules. They had to be original, highly disruptive and hard to copycat. Gross was always a bonus as was positively scary. No cow tipping for these boys, they were artists. Their art was fueled by liberal checks from their well off parents who thought they were financing clothing and textbooks.

Earlier in the year, Sparmy had come close to being thrown out of school for writing erotic letters to the governor's wife, which he had signed with the university president's name.

Char and Nick had attempted to bungee jump in a car off of a bridge the previous year. Unfortunately they had failed to think far enough ahead to

figure out how to get out of the car when the bouncing stopped. They were both on probation for public nuisance charges.

On his own, Nick had falsely tipped off a local TV news station that there had been a nuclear accident on campus. It actually made the AP wire and national news before it was discovered to be a hoax. Nick was never caught although he was suspected.

That very week Char had put the wheels in motion to start a series of lectures before a number of ladies clubs and civic associations representing himself as a world famous balloonist. He had created a slide show from numerous pictures from National Geographic along with some he posed to show the "Penguin Men" of the Antarctica His lecture fees would go into the beer fund.

Two weeks earlier, Nick had swiped a human skeleton from a medical school storeroom and the guys had been racking their brains for a prank to pull with it ever since.

As the beer flowed that evening, ideas started to emerge. Rather pedestrian pranks were rejected such as placing it in a closet or a bed. Been there, done that. Something more creative was clearly called for.

"I wonder if we could use it to fake one of our deaths?" Asked Sparmy.

Nick spoke up. "Right, doofus. What kind of death leaves a prepared skeleton behind? Plastic teeth....wired joints....neatly sawed cranium? Moron!"

Char jumped in. "We would have to disguise it some how."

"If we do that, then what's the point of using a real skeleton?"

"Hear me out.....a skeleton is like a scaffolding for meat..." The others guffawed, Sparmy spit beer through his laughter.

Char continued. "Really, guys, that's what it is. What if we were to cover it with meat? "

Nick and Sparmy looked interested now.

"We could do a neat job of it. Put muscles more or less where they belong, cover it with pig skin, fill the inside with blood and guts. It ought to make a pretty interesting splash if we tossed it out a high window!"

"Aces!" shouted Sparmy as he jumped to his feet, "That's it!"

Nick nodded sagely. "This", he said, "will truly go down in the annals of legend."

III

The guys had to use all of their connections to set things up. The meat ended up costing almost three hundred dollars including many square yards of skin and a couple of buckets worth of assorted organs.

Work on the body, which they had affectionately named Mister Meat, would take a few days. They were able to find an unused walk in refrigerator in one of the older buildings on campus and bribed a janitor to look the other way.

There were various problems and hang-ups. The skeleton was from a very small person, like around five feet two inches. They fixed that by adding several cow vertebrae to the spine. The result was some very strange proportions on a now six foot four frame. It took them a while to figure out how to attach the meat to the bones, finally deciding to drill small holes into the bones and hold the first layer of meat in place with screws. Subsequent layers were sewn on top of those.

The cranium was filled with three sheep brains and a ladle full of blood and then epoxied closed. Two sheep eyes filled the skull's empty sockets. Everything was held together with heavy braided cord like the type used for sewing sails together. They learned early on that the body would come apart when moved if they used sewing thread.

They filled the abdominal and chest cavities with a horrendous collection of guts and organ meats from various animals and sewed it closed with a series of slipknots which could be pulled at a strategic moment to spill the gory contents.

Char created an outsized sex organ with pig skin stretched over a bull's penis. The hideous thing would be phenomenally endowed.

All in all the human parody had the most gruesome aspect with stitching criss-crossing over its entire body. The face and ears had been modified from those of a pig having been clipped and sewn as required to make it fit a human skull. The eyelids, having been stretched inwards had an inhuman, slot like quality and hung mostly loose, hardly touching the eyes themselves. The nose was asymmetrical and too small for the rest of the face and the lips, which were a sewn slit of skin, the inside pulled down, were plastered tightly against the teeth forcing the face into a permanent and mirthless grin.

Their work progressed in secret, but the purchase of all the meat coincident with the theft of the skeleton had led to bizarre, yet surprisingly accurate rumors.

The guys knew that they had to finish fast or too many people would know about Mister Meat before the fact.

The plan was to set him up crouched with his back to a high window that had mostly been sawed through. His support would be released by radio control dropping him to the walk below at the exact right moment. The cord which held closed his abdomen would be tied to the window frame so that his guts would spill as he fell and splatter everywhere when he landed. The overall effect, they agreed, should be striking, to say the least.

IV

Howie Berg was wrapped in his winter coat. He muttered to himself as he flipped through the pages of the book with fingerless wool gloved hands. The chill he felt was only half from the temperature inside the refrigeration unit. The rest was supplied by beholding the grotesque and unwholesome thing which lay on the table before him.

It had only taken ten dollars in the hand of the right janitor to lead him to the hiding place. He had come very close to vomiting when he saw the thing. Much of the horror was covered as it was now clothed, but there was still much to repel the viewer.

The hairless scalp was stitched across the top like a football, presumably reaching down the back of the neck. The nailless fingers were puffy and yellow, Showing no wrinkles at the joints. More like gloves really than hands. The stitching went down the inside of each finger showing that each hand was made with two matching hand outlines in pig-skin and merely sewn together around the bones. The sightless eyes were whited over and pointed in slightly different directions.

Berg labored to work as quickly as possible, but he could afford no mistake in this undertaking.

While reading prayers, he reverently strapped tfillin to his arms and forehead. Repeating ancient Hebrew invocations, he devoted the refrigerator as a holy place. Placing aside one book and taking up another, he continued in another, even older tongue, that nigh forgotten language written in the so-called "angelic script". As he did so he withdrew a small penknife from his pocket and carved upon the forehead of the horrid meat puppet the first of four of the angelic characters. The skin parted bloodlessly and the knife left grooves on the dry bone beneath. As Howie chanted, he cut three more letters spelling out the ineffable name of the creator and finished with a brief

prayer in Hebrew. The prayer came down from rabbi Lowe himself, he in who's footsteps Howie was now following.

For a few short seconds blue and pink light washed through the tiny cold space illuminating the expression of awe and horror on Howie's face. For an instant the name of God glowed with a strange light of its own.

In a choked voice he said, "This will teach them! This will show them the reward for mocking God! Show them! Show them what it means to insult the architect of all life!"

Howie ran from the building laughing like a maniac.

V

The house was in pitch darkness as Char made his way to the bathroom. The seven beers he had consumed before bed time had now made their presence known and forced him back to semi wakefulness. A stubbed toe on a table which had been moved without his knowledge galvanized his consciousness even more.

Cursing, he hobbled the rest of the way to the toilet and flipped on the light switch.

It stood in the corner of the room regarding him with dead eyes. Mister Meat.

Standing, the thing's strange proportions were very apparent. In spite of its tall stature, its short arms and legs gave it a dwarfish aspect. Because it had no connective tissue within, the contents of its abdomen had slid downward giving it a huge and absurd potbelly, which protruded from beneath its shirt.

Char stopped and stared and then chuckled. "You got me guys.", he said to himself. The thing turned its head at the sound of his voice and took a step toward him. The mission that had brought Char to this small room was accomplished instantly and without the usual formalities.

He turned and ran shrieking like a little girl, a high pitched and hopeless wail. He didn't get far, the door to Nick's room was directly in his path and he hit it with his full weight. Nick whipped it open depositing Char on the floor, bruised, bleeding from his nose and toe, smelling of urine and crying like a baby. This all took far fewer seconds to transpire than it does to tell.

"What the f....." He started to speak, but Char interrupted.

"Mister Meat!" He followed up that cryptic declaration with a string of obscenities.

"Well, this is a pretty sight." Said Nick. "What happened to you?"

"Mister Meat! Murder!" He became profoundly inarticulate.

"You're nuts! You had a nightmare. Jesus Christ! You stink man! Go take a shower."

Char's eyes went wide at the suggestion that he return to the bathroom. He screamed and ran from the house stumbling and falling several times along the way.

By this time, the rest of the brothers had been roused by the commotion just in time to see Char flee as if running from the Devil himself. They were all grouching sleepily in the common room when Mister Meat shambled in as if he owned the place. It scanned the room with sightless eyes, which came to rest on Nick and Sparmy. Between it and the two was a billiards table that the loathsome thing tossed from its path without effort. The table crashed halfway through the far wall splintering and raising a cloud of powdered plaster wallboard.

Defying known physical laws, all twenty frat brothers went through the front door at once.

Nick and Sparmy were running side by side. Sparmy was repeating again and again, "No way....no way.....no fucking way...uh-uh.....no way", until Nick punched him in the shoulder and said "Shut up!"

They got across the street and stopped to look back at the fraternity house.

"He can't walk around," said Sparmy, "He's just a big pot roast!"

"This was your idea, doofus!" Said Nick. "How the hell did you do that?"

"How did I?!?...First of all, it was Char's idea and second, what do you think I am, Doctor Frankenstein? This isn't natural!"

"Duh! y'think?" It was starting to dawn on Nick that neither Sparmy nor any of the other fraternity brothers had anything to do with the animation of the meat man. He felt something very cold inside him.

VI

Howie was having a hard time not attracting attention in the library. The librarian in particular had used up all of her best dirty looks to no avail. It was only because it was late night and the library was only sparsely populated that she had refrained from calling the campus police.

He was immersed in several old tomes muttering in Hebrew and giggling periodically. He had actually slapped the table and guffawed loudly a few times.

Now across the room as a female student gave a little squeak and jumped from her chair. "Oh God! There is a really sick looking bum outside!"

Howie looked up from his book with a beatific smile. "My soldier! The living hand of God! He returns!"

All faces turned toward Berg as he ran to the window. He flung it open and shouted outside. "Come to me! It is I! He who called you into God's service!"

Those looking outward got their first good view of the creature and gasped almost in unison. The creature looked at Howie with the adoration of a faithful dog. It shuffled toward the building and all in the room made way for it as it entered and walked, its huge belly swaying side to side to face Berg.

Howie reached out and stroked the creature's loathsome face and cooed at it like a doting mother. "My friend...my one man army of retribution..."

The Librarian was picking up the phone to call the police when Howie spotted her.

"Stop her." he whispered to the monster.

With surprising speed and agility, the thing knocked the receiver from the librarian's hand and then backhanded her with enough force to break her neck. She fell to the floor unconscious. Seeing this, the others bolted. Word would be out soon.

"Shit." said Howie, "Not much time to work with now."

He turned back to the unwholesome and nasty meat man. "You must get them all now! Go!"

The creature turned and walked from the library leaving Howie behind, laughing with dark merriment.

VII

Char was well known to the police. They felt about him pretty much exactly the way you would expect they might feel toward someone who had caused them useless and sometimes dangerous work in the past. That's why the two patrolmen recognized him instantly when they saw him running down the street.

Officers Petty and Johnston just assumed he must be on some kind of drugs when they picked him up. This assumption was drawn from the fact that he was wearing nothing but a urine-soaked pair of pajama bottoms and was babbling incoherently about a "meat man".

When they said they would take him home, he started screaming uncontrollably and wouldn't calm down until they promised to take him to the station.

It took them more than an hour to get even an idea of the story out of him. The parts of it they believed, they didn't like, but they didn't believe much of

it. Apparently something had happened at the house, no doubt alcohol or drug inspired which had led to some sort of panic. The whole business seemed to be linked to some stupid and disgusting prank they had been trying to pull. The description he gave for "Mister Meat" had made their stomachs turn. They put Char in a cell where he was curiously happy to be, and decided to go back to the fraternity house to look around and ask a few questions.

They didn't find anyone on the premises and the place was such a mess that it was hard to tell if there had been an altercation or not. That is until they found what was left of the pool table. It must have taken all the guys running with it full speed to put it through the wall like that.

In a nearby Dunkin' Donuts, they found one of the frat brothers. It was Ronny Walters. As soon as they established that he was a resident of the house they started asking questions.

"Do you know a Charles David Allen?" asked Johnston.

"Yeah sure, is Char o.k.?"

"We think so, but something scared him pretty bad."

"No shit! It scared me pretty bad too! Mister Meat! He's alive!"

The cops rolled their eyes.

"Do you know Nicholas Harris or Donald S. Parmenter?" asked Petty.

"Nick and Sparmy ran off, I don't know where."

The officers weren't able to get much else out of Walters except more crapolla about "Mister Meat". He didn't look like he was on drugs.

The radio on Johnson's belt squawked about an emergency at the campus library and they ran out after asking Ronny to check in with them in the morning.

VIII

Char was awake. At this time he felt like it was unlikely that he would ever sleep again. At least he felt he was somewhat safe surrounded by the steel bars of the cell. He was for the moment content to stare off into space. The desk sergeant had come back about fifteen minutes earlier to put the lights out, so now he was wide-awake in the dark.

The soon to be setting full Moon shone through the bar covered window casting a pure and melancholy light upon the jail cell's floor. His mind was starting to wander when he heard a sound from the front of the station, then suddenly what was unmistakably a gunshot.

Char jumped to his feet. He didn't have to guess what was going on. He heard an agonized wail abruptly cut short by a wet tearing sound. There followed the sound of many pieces of furniture tumbling over.

The door to the holding room flew open and Mister Meat shuffled in. In the moonlight Char could see a bullet hole directly through the breastbone of the creature. Had it been a true living thing it would have been an instantly mortal wound, but it was now clear to Char that this was a being beyond life. An automaton animated by some force wholly outside of ordinary matter or energy.

He shouted at the monster, "Go ahead! Try to get through these bars! You can't touch me now!"

Mister Meat's face remained basically expressionless, forever stuck in a Death's head idiot grin. Its face was turned toward Char but its eyes were clearly unseeing. Whatever force this horrifying thing was vessel for required no light to sense its surroundings.

It took two steps to reach the cell and clasped the bars in its pallid hands. Without apparent effort it ripped the door from its hinges with a quick snapping-grinding sound.

Char was screaming as he tried to climb the wall. The creature tossed the heavy door aside and stalked toward him. The monstrosity picked up Char as if he was as light as a bag of potato chips. As the creature held him close, Char could smell that the meat that was its flesh had started to turn, filling his nostrils with a sharp, sour smell.

It placed him upon the floor and made ready to strike when Char's knees failed and the blow missed him by inches.

Char lay looking up at the creature's huge belly when inspiration struck. Reaching up he seized a dangling cord and pulled with all his strength.

The stinking and slimy mass of organ meats hit him and momentarily pinned him to the floor. When he again looked up, he fully expected to find that the monster had been sent to whatever it had that passed for a maker only to see it standing impassively with a huge ragged hole where once its ponderous abdomen had been. He cursed his stupidity. This parody of life didn't require those organs for its survival!

He attempted to rise and flee but found his progress impeded. His legs were tangled in a loop of intestine, which seemed to actually be tightening around him. He was, for some reason, unable to peel a slice of beef liver from the side of his face. A piece of tripe was, of its own accord forcing itself into his mouth cutting off his panicked cries. It dawned on him that this mass of unassociated viscera were animated by the same malign force that

moved the creature itself. This was his last thought as the final darkness closed upon him.

Petty and Johnston had found the librarian barely alive. The paramedics were worried about her becoming a paraplegic. No witnesses had yet been found to explain the apparent attack.

The policemen had scarcely gotten back to their car after seeing the ambulance on its way when another emergency call came in.

The call had come from another patrol unit, not from the station. Something had happened at the station itself.

The other cops were virtually incoherent when describing it. Boyd, the desk sergeant on duty was dead, his body literally torn in half. The only prisoner, young Charles Allen was also dead having been bizarrely and mysteriously suffocated.

Petty and Johnston were not big city cops. They didn't see death every day. There had not been a murder in this community in over fifteen years, longer than Petty's entire career on the force. Something this grisly was well outside their experience.

Some maniac was out there. Someone dangerous beyond words who somehow had something to do with this "Mister Meat".

The body of Charles Allen lay curled up in a pile of decaying slaughterhouse waste. The door had been removed from his cell, its bolts and hinge pins shorn through as if it had been pulled free with a tractor.

They could barely even look at Boyd's body. They had heard of railroad or industrial accidents which had left corpses like this. Had he been torn apart by wild horses? His revolver had been fired once, at who or what, they could not say.

IX

Nick and Sparmy came into the Dunkin' Donuts at around three thirty where they ran into Ronny.

"Jesus!" , said Ronny from his stool at the counter, "Where have you guys been? The cops were looking for you!"

"We didn't stop running for a while after we got out of the house. Mister Meat was looking right at us when he picked up the table."

"Yeah, I guess you must have been a little spooked...Char's in jail!"

"Shit!", Said Nick, "I wonder what he told them? He wasn't in real good shape last I saw him."

"I don't know...they had to go, something at the library, did you hear the ambulance?"

"Yeah, we did. Heard anything?"

"A couple of girls came in about an hour ago. One of them had been at the library." Ronny looked up, "It was Mister Meat. They said that Howie Berg could talk to it."

"Howie Berg!", exclaimed Sparmy, "He's the guy who threatened to rat me out about the love letters! What's he have to do with this?"

"I hear he treated Mister Meat like it was his little boy and he was its mama."

Sparmy looked like he was going to retch. "That's sick! I wonder if he's the one who carved up his face?"

Nick looked at Sparmy quizzically, "Huh?"

"C'mon, man. You saw...it had those symbols on its head...like off a heavy metal record."

"Sorry, man, I had other things on my mind....like getting the hell out of there. All I know about his face is that he's butt-ass ugly!"

The three continued to talk exclaiming and waving their arms. The counter gal came by to refresh their coffee. She was poring for Nick when she gave a little cry of surprise.

The guys turned to see what she was looking at and saw Mister Meat walking slowly toward the entrance.

It had lost its shirt and its abdomen had been torn open so that one could see its exposed spine. Loose flaps of skin hung down around its waist like some fleshy skirt. Its trousers were torn up as if it had been ripping through shrubs and fences, which had stood in its way.

No one on the donut shop wasted a second. Even those who were there that didn't know about Mister Meat were utterly terrified by the sight of it.

As it burst through the front door Nick, Sparmy, Ronny and the customers and employees swarmed out the back.

Again hoofing it down the road side by side, Nick and Sparmy headed back toward campus.

Sparmy breathlessly said to Nick as they ran, "Let's go see Howie!"

X

He knew that sooner or later, the cops were going to have questions for him, so Howie Berg had been trying to work through the last set of sacred

incantations. He feared that he had made errors. Was this how Judah Lowe had come to grief? His defender was of clay while Howie's was of meat. A superficial difference so far as the angels were concerned, he was sure. Had not God made the first man from the dust of the Earth? Therefore was not dust the same as flesh in his eyes?

Having been thrown out of the library by the police, he was now back in his room. As he labored over pages from the Zohar and Abrameilin, he had heard sirens going here and there following in the footsteps of his soldier of retribution.

He was trying to make some shortcuts using procedures taken from more obscure volumes. Howie was hopeful that some formula from one of these texts would bring him into closer mental contact with the avenger.

There was an insistent knock on his door. Not the police already, he hoped. He had counted on them having their hands full with other matters.

He cautiously opened the door a crack only to have it flung open forcefully. Nick and Sparmy crowded into the small dorm room

"Hiya Howie!" Said Sparmy with a sharp edge of menace in his voice.

Howie blanched as the two others backed him into the wall. "What's up guys?" He asked in a shaky voice.

Nick came right to the point. "We heard a rumor. We heard that you're best friends with a pile of meat!"

"Y-you guys....", stammered Howie, "You should never have made that thing. You went to far, you mocked God by making a false man."

"So, you do know Mister Meat!", Said Sparmy, "But he never used to walk around when we knew him. How do you suppose *that* happened?"

"You needed to be taught a lesson, so I made your horrible thing into an angelic vessel. A golem."

"That slimy thing in 'The Hobbit'?"

"No! He is a servant in the name of righteousness! He comes to set right what has been made wrong! HE HAS COME TO SLAY THE ENEMIES OF THE ONE TRUE GOD! HE HAS....."

Sparmy slapped Howie to shut him up. He had gone way off the deep end. "I have to hand it to you, Berg, I have been out-pranked."

"Prank!?!", Howie rubbed the red spot on his cheek, "This is no prank! The soldier has come to eliminate you! He got one of you all ready and he will get you too! "

Nick looked hard at Howie. "What do you mean?"

"Char is dead and the stupid cop who tried to protect him. You guys are next. You too shall be smited! You too shall feel his wrath! You too shall...."

Sparmy smacked him harder this time. "Raving fuckhead!" Howie went down. His yarmulke flipped off his head and spun into a corner like a fabric hockey puck.

Nick looked at Sparmy. "Do you have any idea what the hell he's talking about?"

"I remember a story from a course on folklore. A rabbi in Moscow or Warsaw or someplace like that..."

"Prague." said Berg as he slowly got to his feet.

"Yeah, Prague. Anyway, I guess the government had called open season on the Jews who lived in the ghettos. People would come in and kill Jews and take their property..."

"Pogroms." Mumbled Berg.

Sparmy rolled his eyes. "Anyway, this rabbi, I forget his name....."

"Judah Lowe." Said Howie.

"Shut up!" Snapped Nick.

Howie sat down at his desk. "I just hate it when people get it wrong."

"Fine!", said Sparmy, "You tell it then! All of it!"

Howie looked whipped. He had always done poorly in situations of physical confrontation.

"Every day brought some new injustice to the ghetto, but rabbi Lowe thought of a way to fight back. He turned to the ancient wisdom and learned of how the people of Babylon would mold the clay from the plain of Shinar into figures of men. They would use magic to bring the spirit of an angel into them and give them the semblance of life. The clay men could do mighty deeds. Their strength was unbelievable. These were called golem.

"The rabbi was a great scholar, full of wisdom. He found a formula for creating a golem from clay. This one was animated with a pagan spirit. It had the Hebrew word 'truth' inscribed on its head. By rubbing out one letter, the word became 'dead' and so did the golem. He created the creature and sent it upon the enemies of the ghetto but it became hard to control and ultimately destroyed the rabbi.

"Rabbi Lowe didn't understand that the creature had to be dedicated to God and carry the one true name to truly serve a righteous cause. The risk is that by carrying that name, by having its life come directly from God, that only God may take that life away. "

Nick asked, "So, it has its own will and spirit?"

Berg looked at him. "You actually have some understanding. I'm impressed. It's more complicated than that. If it had only God's spirit, I would have no control over it. There were formulas in other books,

somewhat more arcane books, which would make the creature fully my servant."

"Your servant for what?"

"To make an example of you. To make you pay for your constant mocking attitude. To show the world the penalty for ignoring God! To serve as a MESSENGER OF RIGHTIOUSNESS! TO...."

Sparmy drew back his hand and Berg subsided.

"Howie", said Nick, "Do you know how unbelievably fucked up you are? You killed my best friend! You killed a cop! You did it just as much as if you had used a gun! Listen to yourself. You sound like some deranged terrorist!"

The door suddenly burst open. There stood Mister Meat, much the worse for wear. It had lost the remainder of its clothing. Its huge absurd penis now swung free between its legs, whacking against each one as it walked like the clapper of an obscene church bell.

Many of its stitches had burst and it now dropped little pieces of itself here and there as it moved.

The graven letters on its head glowed with a strange light as did several points on its body.

The creature overturned the bed as if it were nothing. The bed careened across the room hitting Howie as Nick and Sparmy dashed out of the way. Howie was thrown against the window, which gave way. He fell two stories to the pavement below.

Nick and Sparmy were out of the room and down the stairs in seconds. As they reached the walk outside they could see bits of debris flying from the window of Howie's room as the creature destroyed things without seeming rhyme or reason. Howie was moaning semi conscious a few feet from them.

Nick knelt down beside him. "Are you O.K. Howie?" He asked.

Berg was obviously in shock and badly, perhaps mortally injured. "Angelic light...rub out the name...put out the light...he will walk forever if I die...rub out the name..." He lapsed into unconsciousness.

Nick said to Sparmy, "If he doesn't get to a hospital pronto, he's a goner!"

The noise had now started to rouse the dorm. A girl screamed when she saw Howie lying broken on the walk from her window. Suddenly there was shouting from within the building. Apparently Mister Meat had left Howie's room and now was in the corridor.

It took only a short time for full, unrestrained panic to ensue. Students were pushing past one another on the stairs, a few even scrambled out of windows onto the fire escapes. Some seemed to think there was a fire, but

those who had actually seen the meat golem simply fled with a silent, haunted expression.

Swelling in the distance was the sound of police and ambulance sirens.

Sparmy saw Mister Meat in the lobby swinging its arms at random at any student who was unlucky enough to be near it.

It struck one young man hard enough to audibly splinter his ribs. The creature tangled an arm in the loose nightgown of a female student who abandoned the garment to him without hesitation, running off nude, but grateful to be alive as the creature attempted to free itself. In its struggle, its right hand actually pulled free of its wrist. It picked up the detached hand and placed it back on the stump. The wrist now had a bracelet of brilliant light and the hand was again one with the arm.

"Angelic light." Thought Sparmy.

Finally, it emerged onto the walk. The light was all over it now, apparently holding the poorly made thing together.

Nick and Sparmy were frozen with fear where they knelt by Howie's inert form.

Before they could shake off their paralysis, the creature leapt upon Nick. Sparmy jumped to the side and plastered himself against the bricks of the dormitory wall. He was unable to turn away or blink as he watched the unholy thing literally tear Nick to pieces. His ears were filled with Nick's agonized shrieks, which ended suddenly when the monster separated his head from his body.

It was at this moment that the police pulled up. Johnston and Petty jumped from the car and started firing immediately without bothering to call a warning. Several body shots failed to slow it down, but did divert its attention. The abomination turned sightless eyes upon the policemen. They backed away, still shooting as it advanced in their direction. Each shot opened a new glowing patch on Mister Meat's body. A bullet struck the creature in the temple blowing off the entire back of its head. The brains and eyes tumbled out of the skull and the skin of the face sagged down below the now empty eye sockets. The creature yet moved forward and both of the terrified cops were reloading. The etched sigils on the remaining frontal bone glared angrily.

Sparmy was afraid that he was about to see what had happened to Nick also happen to the police. In a moment of inspiration, his hand touched his heavy brass belt buckle. In an instant, he pulled the belt through the loops in his pants and was swinging it in a circle over his head. "Over here!" he shouted, "Over here, you ugly wad of gristle! I'm the last one! I'm the one you want!"

The animated instrument of vengeance turned to confront Sparmy, and as it turned, the belt buckle smashed into the free-standing wall of bone that was the creature's forehead, which shattered like a china tea-cup.

It still had gripped in its hand a piece of one of Nick's arms, a hand which now severed itself from its wrist and fell to the walk. As the cops and Sparmy watched, the creature silently came apart at the seams until it was no more than a stinking heap of bones and gore.

"Wiped out the name...." said Sparmy under his breath. He giggled nervously.

XI

The deaths of that night were attributed to an un-apprehended but particularly deranged serial killer. A profound lack of evidence kept the investigation from getting too far.

In spite of the evidence of their own eyes, Johnston and Petty dismissed Sparmy's account of the night's events and threatened to see that he was committed to a mental institution if he repeated it to anyone.

Howie Berg, who would spend the rest of his life confined to a wheel chair, was in fact committed and after an interview with him, his family rabbi strongly recommended that he remain institutionalized for life. He now spends his days immersed in the tomes of ancient wisdom. He has also spends much of his time sculpting in clay.

Chris Ware's The Ragtime Ephemeralist is a sporadic magazine devoted to the culture, history and music of the Ragtime era. If you are a devotee like myself, you will be in heaven should you ever come across an issue. The following story was the only fantasy tale ever deemed appropriate to appear in its pages.

The Face in the Echoes

The whole thing had just sort of emerged from a number of places at once. If Hoberman had not been such an obsessive gadgeteer and if I hadn't had the sudden windfall that made me able to put up with him, and further, if Dawson hadn't been thrown out of school, the discoveries we made might never have taken place.

To tell this tale properly, I need to give you a little bit of a picture of what Cambridge was like in the early twenties because some of you younger folks weren't around then.

The economic boom years of the beginning of the century had given way to a recession that had hung on for over ten years. The American people had started to take a back seat to other world powers economically, culturally and militarily. In the preceding decade the United States had had its first decisive loss in a formally declared war and had first removed a president from office by impeachment. Lots of folks were unemployed and for those who were employed, all the better jobs were with foreign based corporations. The prevailing youth culture had a lot to do with decadence, meaningless sex and drugs usually used in combination with sometimes horrific synthetic entertainments.

In the city of Cambridge, which was home to some of the nation's more respected institutions of learning, had also become socially stratified between the academic institutions and their infrastructure and those who merely lived and worked in the city. The academic life was totally geared toward placing well trained people in Asian corporations. Virtually no one who passed through those hallowed halls was destined to work in or for America.

This isn't intended as a patriotic rant or anything like that, I just want to give a picture of where we were as a city in those days.

Ever since I had flunked out of Harvard fifteen years ago, I had stayed in Cambridge keeping myself afloat with marginal jobs. I might have gone on that way forever and withered away intellectually when a very rich aunt, who I didn't even know was still alive, died. She left me enough money to be

comfortable for life. Now I spent my days studying and writing about old records and hanging out at cafés conferring with cronies and lusting after college girls. Life had actually become pretty sweet.

The one person I saw almost every day was Hoberman, mostly, I suspected, because he knew I was good for a cup of coffee.

Daniel Hoberman had successfully avoided having to get a real job for years in favor of various schemes, each one contrived to propel him into the realm of the rich. While none of them had ever succeeded in doing so, he had managed not to get thrown out of his apartment and that looked like success enough, considering. The most recent concept of Hoberman Enterprises had been selling devices for modifying a car's ID signal so it could park anywhere without alerting the street monitors. It was successful with a lot of Harvard students who weren't supposed to park in city spaces. Only problem was that it was totally illegal and the human cops noticed what the robot ones missed. The remote ID system made the cop's job of keeping track of what cars were where easier, but it didn't turn them into idiots. They could still look up a license plate and when they found one that didn't match up with the ID signal, they got suspicious. It only took a couple of interviews with a few of his customers to ferret out Hoberman. The judge had him reading stories to kindergartners two days a week for a year to clear that one up.

I was still impressed that he had made these things using parts from computers, televisions and microwave ovens that were an average of twenty-five years old.

The man was a twisted genius.

In any case, I was sitting in the Rainbow Café on the morning of Tuesday, May 4th 2021 when Hoberman rolled in. The tables surrounding mine filled with students chatting animatedly in Chinese and Arabic grew momentarily silent as all eyes were drawn to him.

Hoberman was a bit of a case. People who didn't know him were always taken aback by his appearance. His kinky hair was unkempt and he was in the habit of wearing a white lab coat on top of a second hand grease monkey suit. Every pocket was bulging with gizmos, some useful, some simply mysterious, some positively dangerous.

Today he was wearing a peculiar set of goggles that apparently admitted no light. They were connected by a cable to some sort of portable computer of God-knows-what vintage.

"Hey Stony! Check this out!"

"What, in the name of all-that-is-holy,-good-and-pure is that?", I asked.

Hoberman grinned like a crazed ape. "Sonar, man! I'm seeing the whole world with sound, man, with sound!"

"Lemme see those, man!" He stuck the contrivance over my face. Suddenly the whole world was made of polished steel. The coffee in my cup was like a pool of Mercury. Hoberman looked like a demented bowling trophy.

"These are, like, METALLO glasses!"

"Yeah. I'm only using a short frequency range. It just shows stuff as basic reflections." He reached down and tapped a few keys on the computer and the view changed. Everything was all bands of colors now. "The colors indicate the degree of absorption of the various materials."

"I didn't think sonar could show such a detailed image."

"I'm trying to use a spectrum of frequency to create an image."

"Man, it would be weird to drive a car wearing this thing."

"Try impossible. You can't see through glass with them, not with the frequency range tuned the way it is anyway. You wouldn't want to do that even if you could, your reaction time would be off. You're getting information at the speed of sound, not the speed of light. Doesn't make too much difference when you're walking around, but it could when you're in a car going a hundred miles an hour."

"Bizarre, but impressive."

"Yeah, not bad. All spare parts too. That reminds me, did you know that Yim is shy a drumstick?"

"What in the hell are you talking about?" Yim was the woman he had been seeing for the better part of a year. Superbly athletic and gorgeous, she was better than he deserved.

"I mean she has an artificial leg."

"How could you not have known that? You sleep with the dame, for God's sake."

"Wake up, man, you've seen her naked too. Remember at the beach last summer? Did you see anything wrong then?"

"Nothing wrong at all, man." I allowed myself a sly smile. "Which one is it?"

"It's the right one, and that's the point. It's damn near cosmetically perfect, but I could see that it looked different with the sonar glasses when I tested them. Inorganic matter looks different from organic. I asked her about it and she fessed up. Turns out she lost it in Pakistan when she was in the Air Force. The fake one even feels warm to the touch, but it doesn't match the density and sonic reflectivity of flesh."

"So is it a problem for you? Her having one leg, I mean." I asked.

"Nah....Its not like I'm some big prize. Besides, what there is of her is A-Number-one."

There was no arguing about that. I gave Hoberman back the goggles.
"Yeah, she's a cutie all right."

He rubbed the bridge of his bony nose. I guess he had been wearing the goggles all day and they were a bit on the weighty side.

"Hey, did ya hear about Dawson?"

Dawson was this twenty three year old MIT grad student that Hoberman had taken under his wing. Originally, he was just his foot in the door at MIT, but as time went on, Hoberman had taken an almost paternal interest in the lad. I liked the kid all right, I guess, but he was a bit of a wet blanket. He had recently cleared out a party at my place with an absurdly detailed explanation of MagLev trains to a room full of perky-titted, doe-eyed Leslie girls who quickly went looking for a better party. I wanted to kick his ass, but Hoberman intervened. In spite of this he was a personable fellow and he knew everything about electronics and computers.

"So what's up with Dawson?"

"He got thrown out of school, man."

I was aghast. "How could Dawson get thrown out of school? He's a fucking genius!"

"Well they found out that he was 'borrowing' equipment for my lab"

I rolled my eyes. "You got the boy genius thrown out of MIT. Good one."

"He's sleeping on my couch for the time being."

"So what happens with him now?"

Hoberman grinned. With the springy hair and the weird sonar goggles he was the picture of a classic mad scientist. "He's helping me develop this, for one thing."

I was momentarily distracted by a young Asian student walking by, a superb example of firm girl flesh. She held her head high, gracefully shouldering the weight of her massive sense of entitlement. I never seriously wanted her. Not only was I American, I was a "townie", not a student or a professor. Believe me, women were not impressed with my obscure historical research. Its amazing how far a profound scholarship of John Philip Sousa won't get you.

It sort of galled me that the same women found Hoberman strangely fascinating. Before he hooked up with Yim, he was getting laid all the time.

"Its real interesting, but what's it for?"

"Well, its gonna need more work. The specs are only a toy, its the software that's the big thing. I don't even have it running on a fast computer and it can make the goggles work. This belt pack is built around a twenty year old

laptop. It has a Pentium IV 2150 and its running an early version of Windows VR. There isn't a thing about this particular unit that is less than fifteen years old."

Don't get me wrong, it was impressive that he could make this device out of what was basically trash from the basement. But my personal enthusiasms reach back to a time when even the simplest technology was a wonder.

We spent a little more time handing the goggles back and forth and had another cup of coffee.

Yim showed up about a half hour after Hoberman. She was wearing shorts and I still couldn't tell the fake leg, even knowing that it was there.

Yim Cheung was partially of Korean extraction although, save for a slightly tannish skin tone, didn't look particularly Asian. Her family was fifth generation in the States. She was, however, something to look at. With her exotic beauty and her tall and finely-toned body, she could easily have been a model, had her interests leaned that way.

She gave Hoberman a quick peck on the cheek and said hello to me in her usual formal fashion.

"Good morning Doctor MacDonald!" So what if I hadn't finished my post graduate work, she always called me "Doctor" MacDonald or Preston, if she was being less formal, but never "Stony" like everyone else did.

"Hey Yim. What's new?"

She seated herself and waived at the waiter. "Well, I suppose that you have heard about my darkest secret being exposed." Her smile revealed that it wasn't that big a deal.

"Yeah. I would never have known if I didn't know, y'know?"

"I know, I know, and Daniel wouldn't have ever known had it not been for those snoopy glasses of his."

"Baby", protested Hoberman, "It doesn't diminish you in my eyes in any way"

Yim continued, pointedly talking to me rather than Hoberman. "I'm not embarrassed. Its not something that I meant to be a big secret, although I never mention it, its just private, that's all."

"Well, I'm not going to tell anyone, if that's what you mean."

She suddenly changed the subject. "What's new with your research? How's your book going?" I had been working for several years on a comprehensive history and discography of brass band music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At this time, very few people, save for a small cadre of musicologists, cared at all about brass band music. Even Sousa, the March King himself, was slipping into obscurity. Since the last war, Sousa's music had seemed less meaningful to the great masses. Even to the last days of the

twentieth century, his "Stars and Stripes Forever" had been a major feature of the Fourth of July celebrations all over the country. Nowadays it was still his most played march, but bands always gave it some sort of ironic edge.

"I acquired a stack of records at an auction. One of them was a very interesting performance of Mullen's 'Silence and Fun' with Herbert L. Clark conducting from 1905. I think it has work by a particular trombonist I'm interested in, Franklin R. Davis. I have actually written several articles for various musicology publications, many of which deal with my research on Davis' unique trombone style. There are several photos of Davis with the band. He worked with them on and off over a twenty year period although the photos are incorrectly dated in several cases. The most note worthy instance is one photo from 1907 showing Davis with a small bandage on his left cheek and one supposedly from 1904 with a healed scar in the same location, as if he had the scar before he received the wound. Needless to say, it made for a sly and amusing footnote in one of my articles."

God bless her, she tried to look interested, but I could see her eyes almost instantly glaze over. I really had to learn to say "just fine" to that question, rather than actually answer it.

Hoberman piped up. "Do you know how weird you sound when you talk about that stuff?"

"This from the guy with the super science goggles."

Hoberman took us up to his "lab", which was a converted garage on Green Street. The place was visually confusing and smelled slightly unwholesome. There were all kinds of strange devices cobbled together from older devices.

Sitting in the corner was a huge contrivance, an enthusiasm from last year. It was a one-wheeled car with a computer-driven, tri-axial gyroscopic balance control. I remembered how well that thing took corners at high speeds. I also remembered what happened when the operating software crashed while it was underway. I think he was still trying to straighten out the chassis in his spare moments.

He directed me to an apparatus sitting on a table in the middle of the room. There were some seven or eight cords leading to it to power its various modules. The core was a very modern office computer with a "sensi-wrap" style monitor like the kind seen on arcade game machines. Attached to the entire array was a commercial disc recorder. It was the only piece of state of the art equipment in the entire room.

Hoberman said, "I want to show you how the system works. This is ambient sonar, that is, it doesn't send out a reference signal to create an

image of the environment. Instead it uses various frequencies in the environment itself to collect information."

I was skeptical. "If you don't have a constant signal, I don't think you can create a meaningful image. Don't you need some sort of baseline data to relate it all to?" I admit that I only had a vague sort of idea of what I was talking about.

To my surprise, Hoberman replied, "You're right."

I rolled my eyes. I had been down this road before with him. "So how does it work, then?"

"It has an AI software which accumulates data on how each particular frequency is reflected or absorbed. As the system operates, it creates a library of cross referenced data for a whole range of sonic information.

"For instance, a thin panel of wood will absorb certain frequencies and reflect others. Furthermore, it will reflect or absorb them in specific ways. I have a little demonstration."

He reached over and turned on the disc player. The curved display activated showing only a blank gray expanse. There was a sound of footsteps. With each step there was a small flash of light shown about two thirds down the screen making their way toward the center. "Hello", came Hoberman's recorded voice. The whole image started to appear. The walls of the lab were now defined as was a sort of outline of Hoberman himself. There were deep shadows where the sound of his voice was completely or almost completely absorbed.

The recorded image of Hoberman paced around the lab and spoke about the sonar device. The more he talked, the more lifelike the image became. Details filled out, images became more distinct. At one point, the concrete wall was suddenly painted in as enough information had been gathered, quickly followed by most of the Aluminum objects in the room. He tapped the table with a pen and it was filled in first in sort of a fake looking wood grain and then again in white indicating that it was painted. The actual table, I noted, was painted light green, but the image on the screen accurately showed all the places where the paint had flaked off. Hoberman picked up a small bell and rang it. The window glass was suddenly painted in in a flat blue green shade. It was not transparent.

The disk played on for another twenty minutes as the room and Hoberman took on more and more detail. By the time it was over, there was a fairly detailed, albeit somewhat artificial looking, representation of the lab as if it were lit from directly above.

I was impressed for the second time in a day. "That's amazing. The goggles just showed surfaces, how does this show different materials?"

"Its all wavelength, same as light. As you might have guessed, that last demonstration was made only with ambient sound. It takes more time to gather enough information to form an image with ambient sound than it does with ambient light. The goggles use a reference signal so they can form an image in real time, but the signal has to be sent out into real space. Are you following me?"

"I think so. You mean that you actually have to bounce your 'ping' off of something right in front of you."

"Right-o, but Dawson went to work on the simple AI I was using. He gave it faster access to a broader database with an ability to create flexible paradigms. In short, the software has imagination and creativity."

"Sure, I get it, so do a lot of computer games."

"Yeah, but they do all their stuff inside a computer. Let me show you something else." He pulled out another disc. "Remember Yim's band that played at the River Fest last fall? " He stuck the disc in the player. Unlike the first demonstration, the picture filled in very quickly. There was a lot more sound. The small speakers used by the band were brilliant sources of light. The players were all seen as ebony-skinned, in spite of the fact that the band members were a variety of colors. Their clothing was more or less translucent, making them look as if they were hung with cobwebs. Yim's right leg , however, showed as a bronze color starting mid thigh.

"Now remember, this was created from an audio recording. I had to cut out both side channels and use only the center channel. This only works in monophonic recordings."

My eyes snapped away from the display. "Monophonic?"

When I first got ahold of the record, I had been so impressed with its fine condition. "Florentiner March" Henry Higgins conducting, recorded in 1887, but it looked new. No scratches, no crud in the grooves. I had only played it once to record it to a file, but Hoberman insisted that I set up to transcribe directly from the wax. I suspected that Franklin Davis was on this recording. If he was, it would be the earliest example of his work I had found so far. I hoped that we might get enough of an image to prove it.

"I got this theory," he said, "that the horn used in an acoustic recording might act like a lens."

My ancient cylinder transcription machine had to be hooked up to the system and all the impedance and phase hang-ups worked out. It wasn't an original Edison machine, some collector had built it in the nineteen-fifties with a speed controlled motor and a custom made electric cartridge. The device was a work of art and I was lucky to have found it at auction ten years ago. No one had bid against me.

I know it would be dramatic if I said that when we spun the cylinder, the image just came right up. Not quite. There was so much surface noise that no image could be formed at all. The entire visual field was dimensionless, filled with tiny flashes of light that were the interpretation of the surface noise. It was like a curtain through which no light could pass.

Hoberman got on the phone and called Dawson. He was pissed off about getting woken so early and didn't want to come down. Since getting thrown out of school, he had taken up sleeping past noon.

I heard the half of the conversation at our end which was alternate shouting and pleading. He finally put me on the line with him and I told him about the idea of pulling an image out of a hundred and twenty year old record.

He showed up at the lab ten minutes later.

Yim spent a whole day equalizing the signal while Dawson was feverishly working on code designed to remove every little pop and piece of white noise from the record. They had to spin the original cylinder four more times to get a good enough transcription, each time I gritted my teeth thinking about the groove wear.

Hoberman worked on the data base as we both went over every old photo of the band we could find to provide texture maps.

We had some felafel delivered for lunch and several hours later some curry for dinner and a few hours later some sushi for a snack along with coffee.

Dawn was still a half hour in the future when we were ready to run the filtered recording .

Hoberman warned me that it would most likely take a few runs of the recording to build up a picture. I told him to just hurry up and run it.

"Florentiner March" is a peppy number who's popularity didn't survive the turn of the century, nineteenth to twentieth that is, but I still enjoyed it. It was so wonderfully characteristic of the optimism of those times. I found myself tapping my foot and drifting off with the music as my lack of sleep started to catch up with me, when I heard Dawson say, "What the hell is that?"

On the display was a representation of an arc of conical objects. They enclosed a somewhat confused and complex moving form which was most likely the band, although it was still quite indistinct.

"What is that?", he repeated.

At first I had no clue, and then it hit me. "They are the horns of recording machines. Sometimes they would use twenty or more at a time because they had yet to come up with a way to reproduce records mechanically. This recording is pretty late for that, it must be one of the very last ones made that way."

Indeed as the tune played on and more of the image filled in, we could see that the horns were attached to boxy phonograph recorders. The band itself was still vague, being complex texturally and also being in motion. I knew it would take several more run throughs and more work with the data base before we got too far with that.

We decided to all go and get some sleep and continue the next evening. I knew that I was going to write one hell of a paper on this. No. Not a paper, a book. To hell with the discography, this might actually make some money!

Over the next week, we made repeated reconstructions of the recording, adding to the database more each time. The band was now resolved as separate people, rather than one amorphous shape with Higgins clearly defined standing out in front with the baton. Our view was from the left in front of the band. I realized that another recording from the same session would give us another view, but this was actually a pretty good one. Dawson had actually figured out a way to view the scene from several angles although the one from the position of the horn of the machine was the best. Other views had deep shadows in them and large blank spaces with no information.

The view of the band never got much better. The quality of the recording just wasn't high enough, but I did at least make a positive identification of one of the trombonists. There was no doubt, it was Franklin Davis.

We had better luck with Sousa's "Bride Elect March" Recorded October 2nd 1900 with Arthur Pryor conducting. It took most of a month and further rewriting of the AI, but we produced a video disc of the performance that was almost indistinguishable from a movie. I was able to identify every member of the band including Franklin Davis at second trombone. We were able to make a documentary for public TV on the new method and were suddenly celebrities in the scientific community. Hoberman and Dawson co-authored a widely read article in Scientific American and I co-authored a book with Hoberman about the recording industry in the early twentieth century.

We now had grants and our own money to pursue more work with the ambient sonar. Our lives turned around big-time.

That year, Hoberman was constantly pursued by a man named Howard Branson who represented himself as a "headhunter" for a large research and development concern. He kept offering him larger and larger salaries if he would come to work for the corporation which he would only name if Hoberman accepted the job. Hoberman, smelling a rat, hired a detective to find information on Branson. Every way the detective looked, the trail dried up almost as soon as the man was out of plain sight. Hoberman stopped returning his calls. Besides, he had become interested in our current line of research and we were getting recognition and money enough as it was. Why mess up a good thing?

In 2024 Hoberman and Yim got married. I eventually married also, but not before I enjoyed the sensation of having my pick of female students for a couple of years.

I kept up with my studies and finished my Ph.D. at the same time as we were bringing a commercial version of the device to market for research institutions. I accepted a part time professorship in American Studies at Harvard. I had transformed from "Stoney" the café bum into the respected professor Preston MacDonald in about three years.

Dawson was readmitted to MIT where he was able to write computer code to his heart's content. He made enough money off of the software code that went into the Ambient Sonar's AI to remain comfortable for life and then some. He eventually landed in research and development for the company that produced the first true artificial animals, the ubiquitous "rug rats", "gutter snipes" and "sewer snoids", the robot critters which have been so useful for everything from clearing sewer pipes to cleaning kitchen floors.

There were still historic mysteries for me to solve and my little side interests still held my attention. It was my honor and pleasure to present to the world in December of 2026 a reconstruction from a cylinder recording over one hundred and twenty-two years old, proof that the lead horn player was no less a personage than the great Buddy Bolden. I later found two other records on which he performed, one of which was his own band under a different name playing real, albeit primitive, jazz. That the sound was almost impossible to hear seemed a small matter. It predated the Original Dixieland Jazz Band by twelve years. This presentation started a movement, a restoration of interest in Jazz which had been in the last century, our proudest native art. By 2030, the United States was starting to recover its national pride, and I am proud to have had something to do with it. That year I was guest conductor of the Boston Pops Orchestra Playing Sousa's "Stars

and Stripes Forever" on Independence Day. Its first performance by that illustrious organization in some twenty-five years.

My study of Franklin R. Davis was a continuing concern. The March 29th 1923 recording of "Nobles of the Mystic Shrine" which had Sousa himself conducting, showed Davis looking oddly youthful. The commercial system was much improved from the one we built at the Green Street lab. I worked on isolating his image. At one point in this process I noticed something peculiar. There was an irregularity in the way his torso was being reconstructed at the early stages. The new systems were designed for what had come to be known as 'structural imaging' which allowed the artificial intelligence to produce more realistic movement with fewer run-throughs.

It was in this stage that I noticed that something was peculiar about Davis' body. There was a mass in his abdomen with a geometric contour and there seemed to be something odd about his shoulder joint, some sort of modification.

Hoberman was out in Framingham now but he was able to come into town that afternoon. He spent about an hour on the phone with Dawson while he was in traffic on the way in and had him come down to my office. He got here before Hoberman and had my system rewritten to emphasize internal structure.

The processor speed of the commercial machine allowed almost real time rendering of the scene. I was actually quite calm as the truth revealed itself. We figured that the device was some sort of artificial gland which aided his immune system. The shoulder joints had been replaced with an artificial material, Hoberman surmised that the slide of the trombone could be manipulated thirty to fifty percent faster than anyone with a natural shoulder could. The material of the implant appeared to be a fused ceramic and low friction plastic composite. Hoberman doubted that we had the technology to create it today and we certainly didn't in the first decades of the twentieth century. There was also a structure inside his skull which we assumed was some sort of computer. Franklin R. Davis was a time traveler. The evidence was beyond dispute. For some reason, I was able to accept this knowledge without any surprise. It was the simplest explanation.

Over the next ten years I was able to discover that Davis had made several visits to Sousa's era at different times in his life, apparently to play with different incarnations of the band starting as early as the late eighteenth century. I assumed that he was a scholar working in the same discipline as myself. I wrote a book on Davis and two other people whom I suspected had also been visitors from his era and submitted them for publication, but for some reason, the printing kept being held up. I didn't want to talk to anyone

outside of the academic community about the discovery until the book got to press.

Dawson and Hoberman won the Nobel prize for their work on ambient sonar.

In 2031, I was interviewed and asked about my commitment to the study of early recorded music. I had to recount how not one, but two guidance counselors one in high school and one at college had attempted to redirect my interests to something more lucrative. And then it hit me. One of those men was bald with a blonde fringe and the other had a full head of salt and pepper hair, but both had the same face. The face I had seen in the ambient sonar echoes, the face of Franklin R. Davis. He knew about me, and why wouldn't he? He must have studied using my books and papers for reference.

I knew the day would come, I just didn't know when. It was on June 2nd 2032 that I received an electronic mail requesting an appointment. It was signed "Franklin R. Davis" in quotes.

When he showed up at the office, he looked like a perfectly normal young man. His manner was a little off, though. He didn't seem to have a good handle on the language of my era and consistently paused before he used any colloquial terminology. I was surprised that he shook my hand warmly. "It's a great honor to meet you, Doctor MacDonald." He gushed.

"I might just as well say the same mister..ah...Davis?"

"I'm sorry! My name is Howart Branzen. I'm a graduate student at Michigan National, Class of 2252."

"National?, You're from Michigan?"

"No, I just go to school there. I'm a Lunar by birth."

"Lunar...", He couldn't possibly have meant what it sounded like ...could he? The Moon had only a very few part time residents. Certainly no one claimed citizenship there. I just put that question on the back burner of my mind and got back to the subject. "But you are Franklin R. Davis?"

"I became him. Franklin Davis was killed in the Spanish/American war and had no family, but he did play the trombone. He got much better after the war." Branzen gave a sly wink.

My cool facade was starting to crumble. "W-what can I do for you Mister Branzen?"

"Its simple. As much as I admire it and as invaluable as it has been to me, your research and publications have drawn attention to me which I simply cannot afford. I know you have no way of knowing this, but my visits to past time periods have not all been strictly sanctioned by law."

"Are you here to kill me, Mister Branzen?"

The youth turned white with shock. "Please say that you're joking Professor! I am not a barbarian, nor am I that desperate. I have merely been informed that I must affect some sort of damage control."

"Meaning what?"

"The fabric of history is a good deal more robust than the fiction of your era makes it sound. My being found out is unlikely to damage things in any substantial way, but it is considered unaesthetic to leave evidence around. Most of those who have get ignored anyway. I happen to know that my visits will be mostly unremembered as well. Your book will be thought of as being absurdly radical and other explanations of your findings will become accepted in their stead. You are by no means the first to uncover a visitor."

"I'm not?"

"Time visitors get uncovered all the time! Charles Fort collected several instances and recounted the clever explanations that the official scientific community gave for them. He wrote extensively in the nineteen thirties. Hundreds of ghost and 'U.F.O' sightings can be traced to time visitors. The U.F.O.'s of the late twentieth century are from an era far in the future of my own and very little is known about them even by us. We can't move large vehicles back through time, but they apparently can. They are not human beings like us, but the product of a further stage of evolution."

Every little bit of information Branzen gave me made me feel queasy in some unique new way. I resolved to stick close to essential topics lest I lose my mental balance entirely. "So you're not here to kill me then. Is it that you don't want me to publish?"

"Just so. I can make it worth your while not to."

"I seriously doubt that Mister Branzen."

"Its 'Scholar' Branzen actually, if you must use titles. My friends call me Howart. I would hope to count you among them."

"All right Howart, and you can feel free to call me Stony."

"Stony, excellent!" He removed a piece of metal about the dimensions of a playing card from his pocket. "I want to give you a gift. This is a complete library of my field recordings."

My head swam. Was I hearing what I thought I was hearing?

"Listen to this." He tapped the surface of the card with his finger. Piano music started playing. It sounded like it came from all around. There was remarkable sonic presence. "Do you know what that is?"

I listened for a few seconds. "I think its called 'Pasquinade', by Louis Moreau Gotshalk."

"This is Gotshalk performing it in 1865." He tapped the device again and some beautiful ragtime piano was now filling the room. I was unfamiliar

with the particular tune. "This is Scott Joplin performing pieces from "A Guest of Honor" his first opera in 1904. In your time it was regarded as a lost work." Again he tapped on the little device. Now a New Orleans dance hall combination roared to life as if they were in the room with us. "Buddy Bolden in his prime. Need I say more?"

Never in my life had I truly understood the meaning of what it was to covet something as I did in that moment. "You must understand", he continued, "that you cannot release these recordings to the public, but they will give you the power to write with astonishing authority about these musicians. In the future, you will be praised for your accuracy of interpretation and your deep grasp of the music."

"I-I'm....that is...how....I mean can I....."

Branzen became impatient with my stammering. "Do we have a deal Doctor MacDonald?"

"Oh yes.", I said. "Without a doubt. We have a deal."

He sat there while I called the publisher and requested my manuscript back. My editor was perplexed that I was positively eager to return my advance.

Branzen warmly shook my hand and left me with the tiny music box . I never saw him again.

Now in my dotage when I sit here surrounded by my books and my awards, knowing as I do that I am thought of as the most influential musicologist of the twenty-first century, I wonder how much of that honor is more or less stolen.

I still see Hoberman once in a while, in fact, my grand daughter is soon to wed his grandson.

Hoberman doesn't think of me as a thief. He said it to me so well one time.

"Look man, Branzen was studying your papers. He was following your work because it was so well thought of! He merely gathered some data for you like any good research assistant would if he could."

"He was the best research assistant anyone could ever have, that's for sure."

I nodded my head and poured us both a brandy. We relaxed and talked over old times as we listened to a wonderful improvisation by Franz Liszt.

The intricacies of the little understood science of Parallel fields continues to fascinate. This article provides a good layman's overview.

Parallel Resonant Fields and the Xenocontinua

Parallel Fields

Since the discovery of the existence of Parallel Resonant Fields late in the nineteenth century, physicists studying them have observed a number of strange phenomena associated with them, the most obvious of these "suggested mass" or "static gravity" as it is sometimes known. An object in a parallel field will be shown to be of indeterminable weight but still have its inertial properties intact. There were attempts in early parallel research to use this phenomenon in skyshipping to artificially reduce the mass of a ship and its cargo thus reducing the cost of transport. This was proven to be highly risky because of the other major phenomenon associated with these fields.

It was discovered that a mass in a parallel field was under acceleration in a non spatial dimension which is in direct contact with other temporal continua. We have named these "other dimensions", "xenocontinua". These may be seen as entire universes like our own. Some, remarkably so. If there is a disturbance to the field while a mass is in place, it will drop out of our space, sometimes to be replaced by an equal mass from elsewhere, sometimes to simply disappear. When there is a replacement mass, the object is known as a "xenolite". The Institute has cataloged over twenty-six thousand of them since 1902.

Xenolites

The xenolites are the only way we have had to study the xenocontinua and we have more from some of them than we do from others.

Although it is speculated that our universe is in full contact with all others, some seem easier to reach. The ones which are the easiest to obtain information from are referred to as "near" while those less accessible are referred to as "distant." The nearest xenocontinua are very much like our own world containing even analogs of many of the very same people. It took four years to determine a difference between our own world and the nearest xenocontinuum, X-1-A. When one was found it turned out to be so minor, a difference in the spelling of a particular high school student's nickname, that it led to a theory of "budding" of xenocontinua. It is now believed that universes periodically fission creating two or more where once there was one. We know of at least one, X-24-L, in which time runs backward relative to our own, that is clearly associated with the so called "great inversion" of 1896. It has become progressively more distant since its discovery eighteen years ago.

As I stated before, xenolites are our principal source of information from a given xenocontinuum. A xenolite can take virtually any form, even human beings have been xenolites.

Mostly, however, they are tantalizing clues. Books and newspapers are frequent and valued xenolites, but they often contain obscure references which would lend greater meaning to their content if we knew what they were. Here is a list of some from various xenocontinua.

X-7-C

- Lornberg's theorem
- SoftSystems
- the Madagascar incident
- the Netherlands war
- Homer's muffin
- ...as stated so clearly by Thompson,...
- the Age of Wit

X-2-A

- the Handrail theory
- the Felton manuscript

the Doghunt of '35
fly-swatter diplomacy
cold combustion engine
the "turning" of China

X-9-D

Boop-Jog
the "Holy Fish" position
outside limiter
necrography
motoflattering
digital candor

X-12-B

the Geneva Convention
the Dead Sea scrolls
the Three Stooges
nuclear power
invisible reweaving
World War II
silly putty
The "G" spot
spin doctoring

X-24-G

the Cleveland Amphora
the edict of Barney Schroder
sluce rate tax
hover control
pindalometry
Do-Yen

X-43-N

the Federal Chicken
the Horban Kingdom
molemanship
Zero Plowing
zoned phase power production
Krellburgh's Jest
the Mantle of Fronnden

adjusted freewheel policy

These are just a taste of some of the things that are yet to be figured out by researchers. There are some xenocontinua that are quite distant indeed, where for instance, life evolved differently on the Earth. There are even a few where the physical laws of nature are not as they are for us. Xenolites from such continua tend to be quickly destroyed by even existing in our world, but a favored few can be kept under controlled conditions.

The object known as the "bloop" (X-009603-1) appears to be four (or perhaps five) dimensional. Although it has the *quality* of size, it does not have a *particular* size. It may or may not be animal, vegetable or mineral. It can be seen, but its image on film does not correspond to the way it appears to the eye. It reflects light in a forth, previously unknown primary color. Its weight changes depending upon which of its surfaces it is resting on. It seems to have no inside or outside as we understand them. The object was obtained as the result of the explosion of an overloaded Molloy cell during a very high energy probe. Nothing else from its home xenocontinuum has ever been recovered.

The very first xenolite was what has come to be known as the "Ticonderoga pencil" (X-000001) and is in the University museum in Mulweeno.

The largest xenolite ever recovered was 100 cubic yards of earth (X-000281-4) from X-9-G during a power test.

False Xenolites

To further confuse matters, there is the phenomenon of "false xenolites" which seem to be psyonic constructs having nothing to do with a contacted xenocontinuum. False xenolites have included, a human fecal bolus which smelled strongly of roses (FX-000226), an American quarter dollar piece struck from sharp Cheddar cheese (FX-000048), a tango record which glows in the dark (FX-000530), a copper ingot with the word "unless" inscribed on it (FX-000912), a set of false teeth made entirely of bologna sausage save for one gold tooth (FX-005460) and an inside-out tomato (FX-000018). We now believe that these objects originate in the interstices between xenocontinua. It is known to science as the "Aladdin's Lamp" effect. An operator of parallel resonant field apparatus probes with a sense of expectation of

encountering an object, making a wish, as it were. The focus falters for an instant and the xenocontinuum is lost even as the transfer process has begun and a transmission of "flux" from between the worlds takes place instead. This flux manifests itself as matter, energy or some combination of the two, as in the very first false xenolite, the eternally vibrating doorknob (FX-000001). This common brass knob has never ceased emitting a 74 cycle hum since the day it appeared.

False xenolites may only be obtained by accident. No attempt to create one has ever succeeded. The discipline of studying these objects is called pseudoxenology and is so baffling a science, that a degree in it has never been awarded to anyone in spite of intensive work in this field. It has been suggested that this is the only hard science in which the scientific method cannot be used. Personally, I do not hold with this view but I admit that much remains unknown.

Mollot's Discovery

The technology which made this research possible emerged in the first decade of the twentieth century. Starting in 1902, Alexander Rodman Mollot, working from ideas devised by Valdmarr Poulsen, built the first static gravity focus matrices, better known as "Mollot cells". The original concept was to create a solid state device which would amplify a radio signal. No one was as surprised as him when the completed device did nothing to the radio signal. He abandoned the unsuccessful device to explore other avenues of research when he noticed that it didn't weigh the same as it had at the time of its fabrication. There were forces at work here of which he knew nothing at all.

Through trial and error, Mollot started to create equipment which would be able to both quantify and utilize the peculiar forces generated in the device which he now referred to as the Mollot cell. This was the first primitive parallel resonant field translator. The little machine would produce a region around itself which appeared to be blurred and indistinct as if there was an area in which one could only see double. The device used no electricity but rather used the induced energy produced from the Mollot cell's interaction with the highly polished "phase plate". Mollot hoped that with the cell now controlled he would have discovered an anti-gravity device.

Within seconds of activating the device for the first time, he dropped a pencil on to the phase plate, knocking it out of alignment and deactivating

the machine. It wasn't until hours later that he noticed that a transformation had taken place.

He was jotting down some notes on a napkin at a local diner when he saw that the pencil which had had printed on its side, as so many do, St. Edmundsburgh, NA, this one now said, Ticonderoga, NY. The standard Dixon pencil was, then as now, made in St. Edmundsburgh, never at this upstate New York town with the hard to pronounce name. He called stationary stores all over town to find out if they had heard of such a pencil. None had.

Back in the lab at night he dropped a bottle cap from the Regal Cola he had with dinner into the field, when he examined it he read the name "Dr. Pepper". It was the first intentionally obtained xenolite (X-000002).

Demonstrations of this peculiar effect had enough impact on the president of the Dilmount Institute that Molloy was allowed to set up his own department to research this phenomenon. This department became the Institute for Parallel Studies.

Exploration of the Xenocontinua

What we came to know about the various xenocontinua was realized slowly.

Originally they were numbered in order of discovery, but a more useful system of numbering based on "distance" from our own world was introduced in 1905. A few of them are as follows.

X-1-A has already been discussed as being almost indistinguishable from our own.

X-2-A is very similar to our own world with the exception that

Texas never won independence from Mexico. Greenland is a sovereign nation of Eskimos.

X-2-B similar to X-2-A but Andorra is part of Spain and Woodrow Wilson is known as Thomas Wilson.

X-3-A through F are a series of xenocontinua where the Confederacy won the Civil War. In only one of them, X-3-D, was it not brought back into the Union after ten years or less.

In all xenocontinua more distant than these, the Antarctic continent is a frozen wasteland and Bromfkidor does not exist. Also there is no knowledge of parallel field technology in any of these xenocontinua.

X-4-A through GG are an extensive series of xenocontinua in which the Dutch held onto control of the New Amsterdam colony, in hundreds of other particulars they are as different from each other as night and day in spite of the fact that all have a common history up to 1887.

The X-5 through X-13 xenocontinua become progressively more distopian the more distant they become. Starting with X-5-C we start seeing a large number of socialist style governments holding dominance mid-century. In the X-10 through X-12 continua at least half the worlds population lives under a particularly odious form of communism which harshly restricts personal freedom. Further, about half of the remaining states are oppressive dictatorships.

Two of these xenocontinua, X-7-C and X-12-B have actually been reached a good number of times. X-12-B has actually been visited by explorers on several occasions and it is believed to be the original home of Admiral Wendell Wyley. The X-12 continua are characterized by a number of historical particulars. Abraham Lincoln was assassinated shortly after the end of the Civil War. Bolivar failed to unite Colombia permanently. California remained a part of the United States. In most of these worlds, Europe is a major battle ground in the first half of the century.

X-13-F through N continua have civilization fallen into ruins and the world almost totally depopulated. Xenolites from several of these come to us highly radioactive. No one knows why.

The X-14 xenocontinua all share in common a later exploration of the New World beginning around 1560. In all of these worlds South America, known here as "Virginia", is colonized by the British. North America, known here as "America", is colonized by the Italians east of the Mississippi and the Russians and the Chinese in the west. The largest city in the twentieth century is Nova Roma on the gulf coast.

The X-15 through X-25 xenocontinua are progressively more distant variations based on the Chinese colonizing most of North America while the situation for South America is similar to that in the X-14 series.

The X-26 through X-45 continua are based upon an entirely different race arising in Africa in early prehistory. In these worlds civilization arises about 12000 B.C. in western Africa and soon thereafter in the Italian peninsula. Africans colonize South America before the Indians get there. North America is never conquered by outsiders and a powerful civilization of red men rules it in the twentieth century.

More distant xenocontinua are known by only sparse evidence and difficult to name as a result. We visualize these clusters of xenocontinua as a series of bands which are given region numbers.

Because the previously discussed xenocontinua constitute the first region, the region beyond these is known as the second region. In this region we find worlds where civilization emerged much later and in our time humanity has risen no higher than ancient Summer.

In the third region humanity remains in the wilds or has not even evolved in exactly the same way that it has here.

In the fourth region, which includes over a thousand worlds, humans never appeared on the Earth. In a few clusters of these worlds some other creature rose to the estate of civilization. Interpreting xenolites from this region is highly speculative and the opportunity for error is great.

In the fifth region mammals never evolved. In a few continua in this region we find truly alien life on Earth.

In the sixth region life never emerged from the oceans or failed to evolve altogether.

In the seventh region the Earth formed differently or at a different distance from the sun or not at all.

The eighth and ninth regions are distinguished by differences in solar evolution including variants like the sun forming as a double star or a white dwarf.

The tenth region is very hard to figure out because there is no matter in our part of the galaxy. It extends for at least one million xenocontinua.

The Eleventh region has no matter at all but is very energetic. Light goes slightly faster here.

Beyond these regions there are large gaps in sampling. Entire regions are identified based on only single or fragmentary contacts. The object known as the "bloop" is believed to originate in a xenocontinuum somewhere in the twenty-eighth region. It is the most distant stable xenolite ever recovered.

Functions of Parallel Fields

Parallel fields can be visualized as shifting domains which act as a kind of "package" for our particular reality. I have illustrated this as a nested set of currents. This field impregnates and serves as the skeleton of our universe (fig.1). The standard state of the field is counter rotating and is referred to as "bipolar".

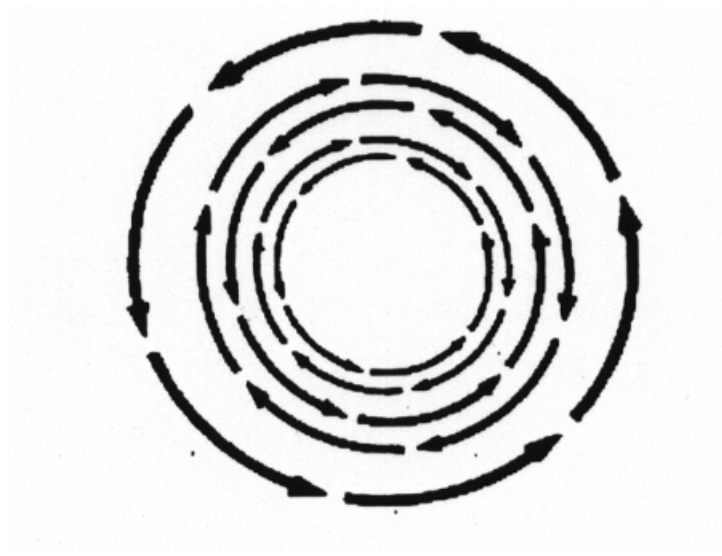


Figure 1: a bipolar field.

A parallel resonant field translator will, in its initializing state, "translate" the field into a "unipolar" state where gravity is rendered intermittent (fig.2). There are also "omnipolar" fields which are unstable and tend to dismantle matter for as long as they exist (fig.3). Some accidents in early researches have been blamed on these fields.

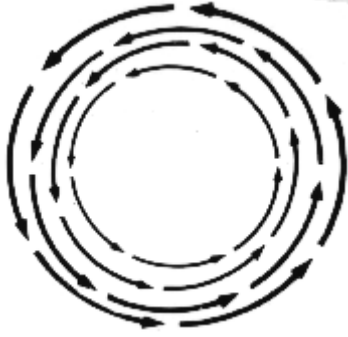


Figure 2: a unipolar field.

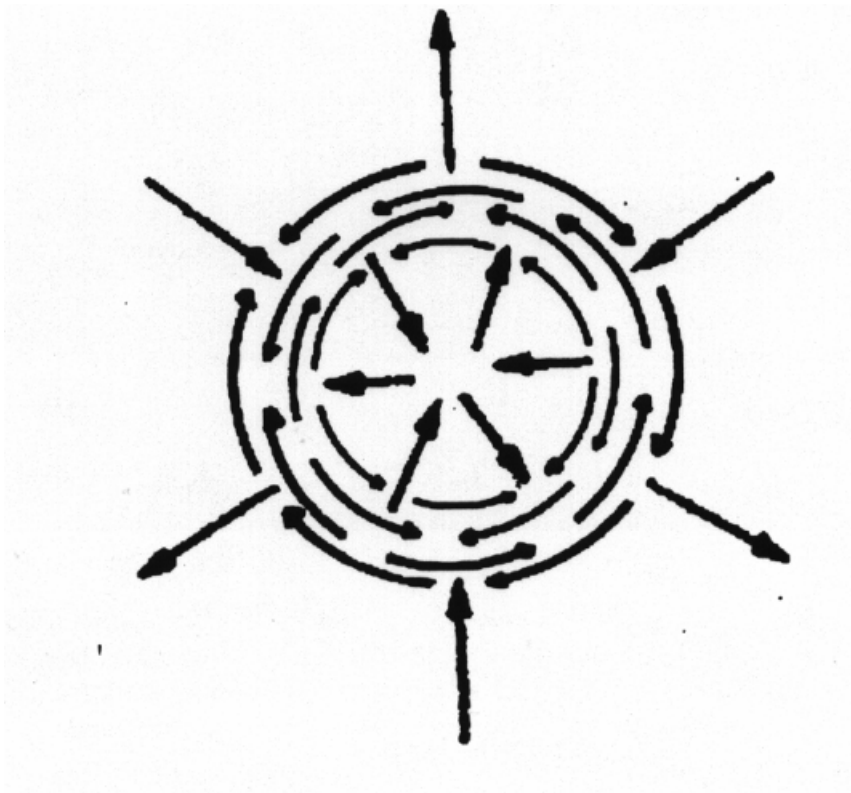


Figure 3: an omnipolar field.

A Mollot cell by itself will cause distortion in a parallel field (fig.4), but that distortion is limited without part of the cell's static gravity charge being bled off to a focusing surface known as a "phase plate". This, along with a tiny amount of power, becomes a simple Parallel Resonant Field Translator, or PRFT, as they are popularly known.



Figure 4: a parallel field.

A simple one can be used for lab demonstrations in gravity and illustrations of the parallel field. One with higher potential will precipitate a linkage to another field, another xenocontinuum.

An active PRFT will exist in a spatially indeterminate state. If the field strength is raised to encompass a large Molott cell distortion enough area, some of what was in that area may remain in a different xenocontinuum when the PRFT is brought to a resting state. A diagram of the event (fig.5) will show the fields intersecting or touching on their periphery, and this is in fact a useful way to visualize the process for those who use it, however, other models have been used to illustrate what happens in these events.

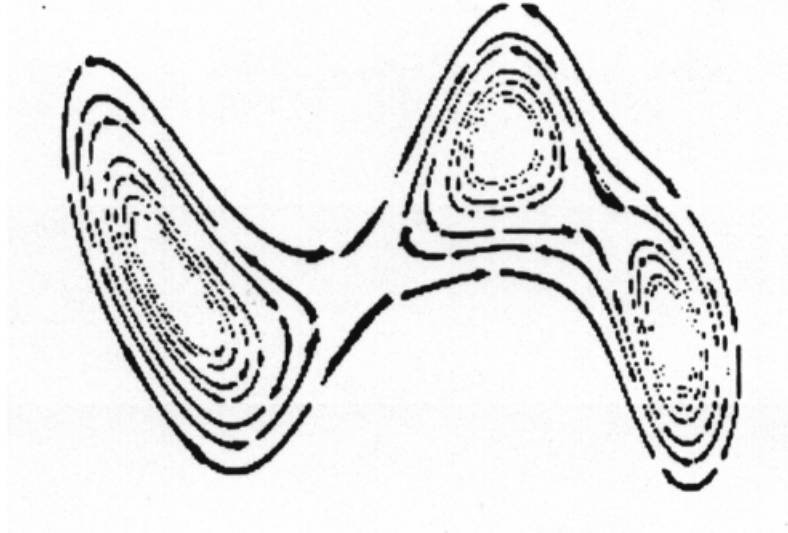


Figure 5: field intersection.

The comparison has also been made to a distant focus lens being used to observe a forest several miles away. Only one line of trees will be able to be brought into focus at one time but they are all part of the same forest and all exist as part of one environment.

Representation of Phenomena

It is important to understand that the way a phenomenon is described is not the phenomenon itself. This can be wonderfully illustrated by the differences in atomic theory on various xenocontinua.

In our world, conventional wisdom holds that the atom, matter's fundamental particle is a reflection of the intrinsic field of the universe as a whole, a direct translation of the macroscopic to the microscopic. Unraveling these fields creates instabilities which result in electro-magnetic forces. Matter as a function of space. We have found this to be a very successful model for understanding gravity and parallel fields.

In the X-7 xenocontinua, atoms are viewed as solid objects

of specific shapes that can "stack" more easily one way than they do another. They have devised a stunningly complex array of shapes on the periodic table of elements and the system has worked amazingly well to describe chemical reactions and for predicting the behavior of both new compounds and new elements.

Scientists on the X-12 xenocontinua have a view of the atom as a complex machine of wheels within wheels. A dense "nucleus" is surrounded by an "electron cloud" which is solely responsible for all electro-chemical effects. The nucleus is supposedly an extraordinarily complex system of particles of diverse properties which are themselves supposed to be constructed from a plethora even smaller and more exotic particles. In spite of this model's almost overwhelming complexity, it is capable of explaining, although not terribly elegantly, all the phenomena associated with radioactivity.

In some of the X-18 xenocontinua, the fundamental division of matter is not viewed as a particle of any kind but rather as an energy field rather like ball lightning. All are seen as fundamentally identical but capable of being "impressed" with the "identity" of an element.

These are just a few of the myriad of atomic theories found outside of our science. I have only discussed, by the way, theories that actually serve as a functional explanation for behaviors that have in turn yielded principals by which knowledge can be extended. I have included no magical or religious views.

The point of this discussion is to explain that the conventional representation of the Parallel Resonant Field is not the only way in which it can be represented. It is diagrammed in this fashion as a convenient way to show certain of its properties.

Parallel Field Behavior

Xenocontinua, as seen from the vantage point of our world, appear distorted. It is a kind of compression as if they were two-dimensional.

The circular paths illustrated by the arrows are known as "flux rings". Those paths are not restricted to two dimensions and they are very flexible. Flux rings are actually observed as the so

called "banding" effect seen in the vicinity of an operating PRFT.

These are, of course, an effect of minute gravity differentials. When the static gravity of a field is raised above a certain potential, flux rings will start encompassing other xenocontinua (fig.6).

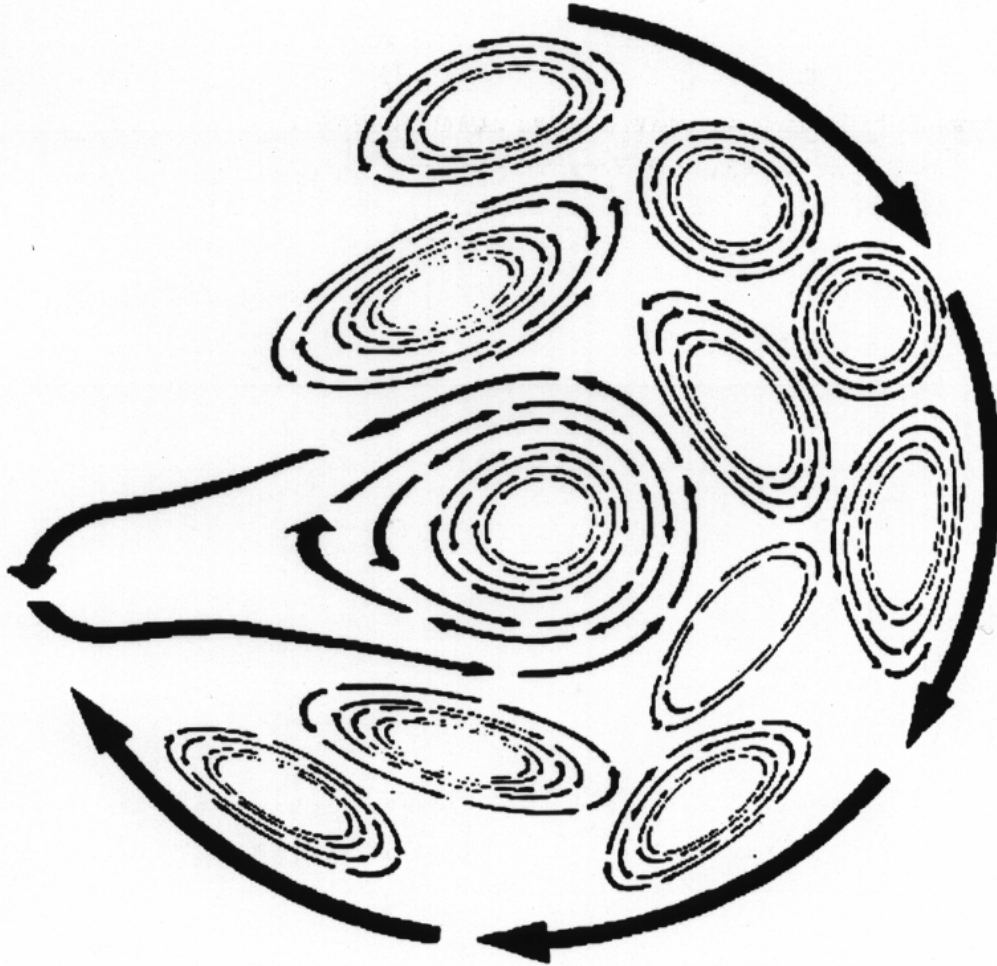


Figure 6: expanding flux ring.

When that potential has been reached, the phase plate of the apparatus must be positioned in such a way that it can be brought into phase with the flux rings of a neighboring field. When this is achieved, the fields are in a state of parallel resonance. The area encompassed by the field becomes common to both continua.

Reaching more distant xenocontinua requires parallel probe much higher energies. The unfolding flux regions are much trickier to handle and difficult to diagram which is why it can be so hard to correctly

identify very distant parallel regions (fig.7).

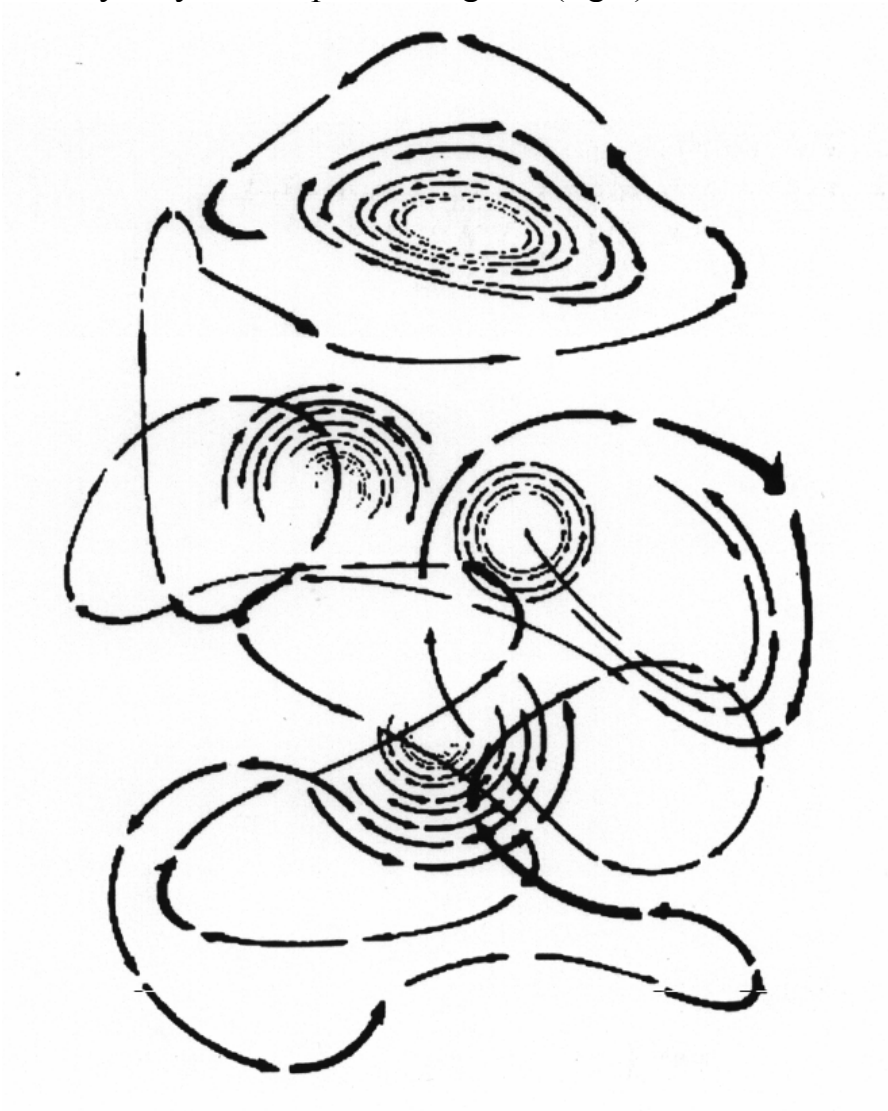


Figure 7: high energy parallel probe.

Finally, there have been discovered regions of conjoined xenocontinua with ever shifting historical particulars (fig.8).

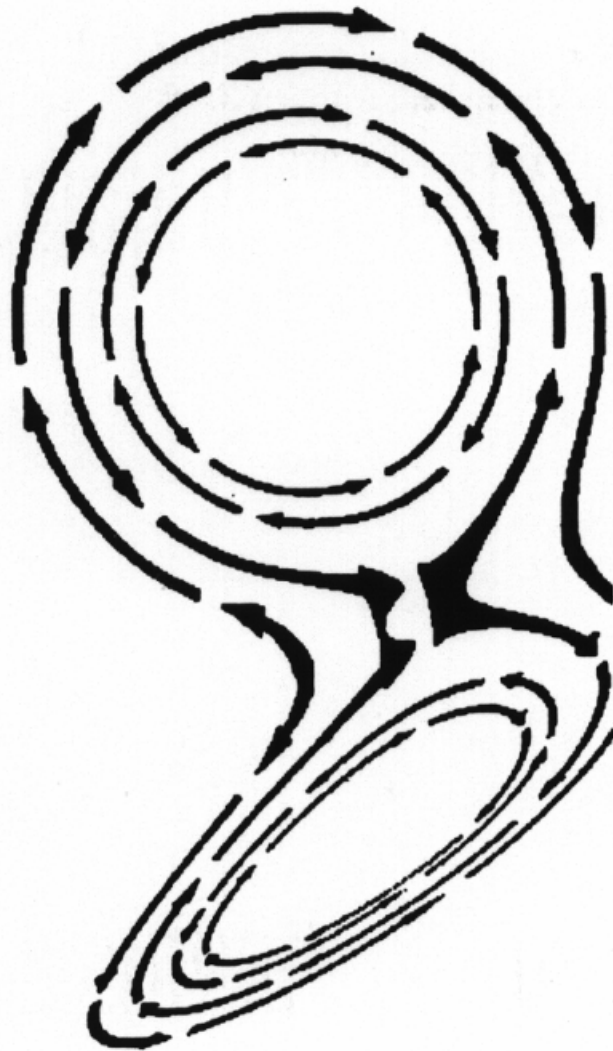


Figure 8: naturally conjoined fields

These xenocontinua abound in, so called, "psychic" phenomena. Such continua by nature are very close, perhaps in the process of budding to form new worlds. A person in such a xenocontinuum may think he knows a fact perfectly only to find one day that it never happened. Xenolites appear and vanish with regularity. It is believed that continua cannot exist in such a state for too long. One could imagine that science would never develop in a xenocontinuum of this sort if it stayed conjoined permanently. The philosophy that the world was knowable or understandable would be laughed at heartily by the inhabitants of such a world.

And so here presented for the intelligent layman is the barest outline of the physics of parallel fields. For further reading, I would recommend "Parallel Realms" by Vladimir K. Ulianov and Guido F. L. Romanelli.

Edgar Rice Burroughs, the creator of Tarzan, has a legion of loyal fans. Even in the twenty-first century they are still out there. There are even some among them for whom the somewhat less than seventy novels he wrote can never be enough. They have to write more about the characters and places he created. A few of these have been penned by authors with considerably greater powers as a writer than Burroughs himself.

I myself am a big fan of ERB and have been since I first picked up a copy of Tarzan and the Ant Men as a ten-year old. For a stretch of time in the late nineties, I read and posted to a Usenet group dedicated to the discussion of his works.

The world of ERB's novels was deeply intertwined. Almost all of them were related. They took place in the same fantastic world, a world where English lords were mighty jungle kings and Confederate captains won the love of copper colored Martian princesses and they always won and never died.

I wondered in print on the news group what the fate of immortal heroes might be. If John Carter, who never remembered a childhood, was eternal, then what happens to him when the times change? Someday, an immortal will no longer fit in the world and yet there he will still be. History marches on. What if in the twenty-first century, Charlemagne or Genghis Khan still walked among us? If they still were our leaders?

I wrote this story to entertain that news group and examine that question.

At the Core of Mars

Chapter 1

A Prince of Earth

I will, in time, explain the method of how I have been able to address the inhabitants of the twentieth century. Suffice it to say that a method became available to me and addressing my remote ancestors became both possible and desirable.

My name is Julian, officially Robin Harold Julian 68th, Prince-Jemdar of Earth, and the Protector of Vah-Nah as well as several equally important sounding titles and that alone should inform you of some of the circumstances of my life. I bear the name Julian with a certain amount of pride, but also with the clear knowledge that I have personally done nothing to create the reputation which it signifies.

Julian is the name of the house of the Yank-Jemdar of Earth and has been for some six hundred odd years ever since Julian 20th, the Red Hawk started the revolution that would result in reclaiming our world from the Kalkars of Vah-Nah.

Some day, I will be Jemdar for as much as that is worth. The position has been largely ceremonial for two centuries. The fact is that the Julians are the pampered pets of the Terran nation. We live graciously, we have what we want, the people love us and we incite no controversy. For me, life has held opportunity for everything I could possibly want save for that which I want the most, adventure.

Adventure! I have learned not to even mention the word in the presence of my father! He is ever willing to dismiss and deride my strange craving. Every young man once sought to toss off the bonds of his world and seek something greater, unknown and dangerous, but this has slowly been bred out of our race as we have advanced through time and grown to know more of the world.

In the era before the coming of the Kalkars, humanity had become briefly aware of the existence of the inhabitants of Barsoom and Pellucidar but had that knowledge stripped from us during our cruel oppression. That awareness was won back through difficult exploration by men who are as remotely in the past from me as is Christopher Columbus from your age.

Today, San Francisco the capital city of Earth stands almost directly above the city of Greenwich in Pellucidar and can be reached in a small fraction of an hour by underground rail. The average person can holiday on Amtor or might very well have a second house in the restored and irrigated country sides of Vah-Nah. The would be adventurer who wishes to travel to Barsoom need only purchase a ticket and may, if he has the means, make the passage in pampered luxury. I myself took the first part of my university in Greater Helium before I returned to Earth to continue my studies.

To a young man, who craves the unknown, this world of my age seems tame and lacking in that which a young fellow of my sort needs the most, that hated word. Adventure.

Barsoom holds political sway over all of the worlds outward from the sun from itself although they have only developed Thuria, Cluros and Eurobus with a few of its moons to any degree. Earth controls the Moon and the inner worlds of Pellucidar and Vah-Nah under the direct government of the Jemdarate and administrates Amtor as a protectorate with its own local Jemdar. The two Solar governments have lived with peaceful, friendly relations for as long as anyone on Earth cares to remember.

For a fellow of my temperament, this was a perfectly awful situation. There were no new worlds to conquer. There was no good fight to fight. All my life, I had immersed myself in the tales of the great heroes of the past. Gilgamesh, Alexander, Robin Hood, John Carter, John Clayton (Lord

Greystoke), Julian the Red Hawk, all of these men got to live the life I craved but was seemingly forever cut off from me.

Or so it was until one day two years ago.

A day like any other it was. I was to make two appearances, one to speak to a civic association in London and another to be interviewed by the "personality press" on the Jemdar's palace grounds.

As the air-car was whisking my secretary Man-tan-ko, a Vaga, and myself over the Atlantic Ocean a radio message arrived. Voiced in official language that left no doubt as to its gravity, I was asked to return to San Francisco. And appear before my father, the Jemdar.

Even having grown up around it, I was still impressed by the Jemdar's audience room at the palace. No man could not be, for its design was for that very purpose. It was here, at least symbolically, that all humans of Earth knew resided the very soul of their race. When Man-tan-ko and I entered the room we were surprised to be greeted with a full honor guard and I saw that standing with my father was the President who was the true political head of state of the Jemdarate of Earth. With the two of them stood a Barsoomian in a metal laden harness wearing the yellow bordered cloak that signified that he was a messenger of the Jeddak of Jeddaks, The Warlord of Barsoom. Of course, the "metal" was purely decorative, signifying his office, nothing more. Barsoomians born after the 24th century were raised with their historic grand martial tradition as nothing more than quaint folklore. He was Nomar Tomak, a high attendant of the Jeddak's court who I had met on several occasions during my university days. Normally a jovial fellow, he favored me with not so much as a smile on this day.

My father was the first to break the silence. "My son, I am sorry to have brought you back to court with so little warning, but this is a somber day and you are called upon to perform your duties as a crowned prince. You must travel to Barsoom without delay and stand as Earth's representative on a very bleak occasion. After a brief illness, the Grand Jedarra of Barsoom has passed away. You must attend her state funeral."

I was stunned. Barsoomians live ten times longer than Earthmen, a fact which most of us take easily in stride, but sometimes that strange fact is brought home to us with alarming clarity. This was just such a time. The Grand Jeddara was like a human monument whose years of life had encompassed all of the greatest years of our history. To call her a monument, unfortunately, obscures the fact that she was also a woman of great beauty and wisdom whose devoted husband never ceased to refer to as "incomparable". She was Dejah Thoris, the Heliumite princess who helped her husband reclaim a dying world! I had known her, and like so many

others learned that to know her is to love her. Beyond a doubt, she was the most admired woman in the Solar Worlds. Now she had died and an era had come to a close.

I would go and stand with the Jeddak as he bid farewell to his wife. The Jeddak himself was a man with a strange history. It was his claim that he had originated on Earth although his life span exceeded even that of the Barsoomians who he had come to live among and eventually rule. His name was John Carter. He was the Warlord of all of Barsoom, a planet which he had known in his earlier life by the name Mars. No one had referred to the planet by that name in hundreds of years. It was a place name as out dated as the name Cathay would have been to people of your century.

Nomar Tomak provided for my passage aboard the great Barsoomian ship which rested on the water in San Francisco bay. The passage to Barsoom would be swift beyond the imagining of you to whom I address this tale. I would appear before the court at Helium in a mere two days.

Even at that, the journey seemed long indeed with the dark mood which ruled the ship's crew. The blackness of the space outside our ports mirrored the feelings that every Barsoomian had in his heart.

When we finally entered the atmosphere of Barsoom, I was finding that even on this sad occasion, I looked forward to seeing the wonders of Helium once more. When the city of Greater Helium with Lesser Helium in view some seventy five miles beyond came into view on the horizon, I was somewhat surprised, although in retrospect I don't know why, by the number of airships which filled the sky overhead. People had come from every corner of Barsoom to say a final goodbye to the Grand Jedarra.

Even in mourning, the Barsoomian nobility wore bright silks and glittering metal. These were a warrior people by temperament and their honored dead were given tribute by showing that the Barsoomian heart beats ever strong. John Carter himself met me in one of the palace gardens and clasped my hand firmly. Ignoring his own grief, he inquired after the health of my father and the progress of my studies. I was always flattered by any interest the Jeddak showed in me. He had checked in on me frequently in my university days, but my awe of him never lessened. A person in the twentieth century could only imagine what knowing him was like. It was as if Julius Caesar was still alive and walked among us.

"My father is in good health," I told him, "and I have only a year before my degree is completed. I'm sure that I shall have much use for it when I become a paper ruler."

John Carter's frown made me instantly regret my flippant remark.

"Lad," he said, "even though you are to be spared the responsibility of governing your people, they shall still look to you for wisdom and as a symbol of excellence. You must not disappoint them."

I looked sheepish before the great man. "I only wish that I, like you, had *earned* the right to rule."

John Carter had once told me that the world had become too tame for him. He felt that he had become superfluous living among a human race that was at peace with itself. He once told me, "The title 'Warlord' has become something of a joke in the ongoing absence of war. These days it makes more sense to call me simply the First Jeddak, or Jeddak of Jeddaks, for I have become a man of politics rather than a man of the sword."

Now in these days following his greatest loss, he had become a subdued, quiet man, more given to keeping his own council rather than involving himself deeply in the day to day affairs of government. The high jeds did most of the governing these days.

He looked deep into my eyes and gave a wry smile followed by a deep sigh. "Yes, there it is, the warrior spirit. I thought it had died out among the people of my home world. Your turn will come, I can feel it and I am rarely wrong about this. Remember this. When it comes to you that you are thoroughly beaten, that you can do no more, when hope is gone check to see if you can yet draw a breath. If you can then all is not lost. You may still conquer as long as you are still alive. When you are in that dark place, say it aloud as I have had to several times even in these last few sad days, I still live! "

"I still live." I repeated. It seemed rather tepid advice from a man of such far-reaching experience. I would have expected something that was a bit more of a revelation than that. Nonetheless, it had come from the Jeddak of Jeddaks so I resolved to remember it anyway.

The funeral itself drew over a half million people in the great square of Helium city with several millions more listening by wireless. Further by means of sophisticated Gridley wave transmitters, it was heard by persons on every Solar planet.

I, like every other person in the crowd, was moved deeply by the sight of the inert form of Dejah Thoris, still grandly beautiful in her eternal repose. The Barsoomian funeral, was itself a comparatively recent tradition, less than a Barsoomian lifetime ago. In the Grand Jedarra's youth, it had been the tradition for persons near death (or merely tired of life) to let themselves drift down the river Iss (they thought) into the hands of the gods. When John Carter discredited this belief, it precipitated the most important religious crisis in the history of Barsoom. In the centuries since, the Barsoomians,

with some exceptions, have adopted a humanist philosophy. They recognize that, today, their symbolic acts exist for the benefit of the human population, not the gods.

As I stood with the other prominent mourners I heard a disturbance behind me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a young woman run from the thick of the crowd with a look of mortal dread in her eyes.

John Carter also saw the girl and called out "Tamla!" It was then that I realized the girl was Tamla of Helium the eight (Barsoomian) year old thrice great grand daughter of the Jeddak. She had been well known as a difficult child and as she had grown older she had become tomboyish and positively wild. Tamla was the subject of much gossip for having taken on the habit of wearing a man's style of harness and metal, complete with real, not decorative, weapons.

The girl's disposition was of no account at this moment, however, for she was in obvious peril. John Carter had already drawn his sword as had his son, Carthoris and his close friends Kantos Kan and Tars Tarkas. All of them took a step backward, however when they saw what emerged from the crowd in pursuit of the girl. It resembled a Barsoomian Green man although its skin was a dark nut brown and its tusks pointed directly outward from its face like twin spikes. Its intermediate set of limbs were specialized as a pair of leathery wings, which, as it cleared the knot of people, it spread and began to beat vigorously. From the base of his spine emerged a long tail with a small flat fin at the end, perhaps to aid it in steering. It was almost instantly out of the reach of even the long sword of Tars Tarkas. John Carter, Tars Tarkas and the rest gave chase as the girl started to run directly toward me with the nightmarish thing a mere few feet behind her. A scant second before the girl could reach me, the flying man scooped her up and with powerful strokes of its huge wings raised himself high aloft with the girl screaming in panic firmly held in his hands. Without thinking I jumped straight upward with all the strength my legs could provide. In the Barsoomian gravity, this was enough to propel me some fifty feet and into reach of the creature's tail. Kantos Kan had drawn a powerful Barsoomian pistol, but The Jeddak stayed his hand lest he accidentally shoot Tamla or myself. I was being furiously whipped back and forth in the wind as I clung to the flying man's tail with my self preservation foremost in my mind.

A loud I cried at the top of my lungs, "I still live!" How hard I tried to believe that that would help.

As the palace dwindled behind us, I saw a flyer rise from its roof to give chase and prayed that I could hang on long enough for it to reach us.

Chapter 2

The Doorway

The flying creature was eager to be rid of the extra weight that I was adding to his load. The air car With John Carter et.al. aboard was gaining on us rapidly preventing his escape.

It placed Tamla upon his back and drew a pistol which he attempted to aim at me by firing upside down between his own legs. I jerked aside at the last second causing him to wound his own tail but doing me no particular harm. He was more successful with his second shot which was directed at the pursuing flyer. The car dropped from the sky to come to a skidding halt on the mossy plain below. I could see that none of the occupants were injured from the crash, but it was also clear that their chase was at an end.

I attempted to call to Tamla, but my efforts were by necessity infrequent as most of my effort was involved in merely hanging onto the flailing tail. At a point when I thought that the creature was becoming tired enough to have to put the two of us down, a strange feature appeared on the horizon. It looked like a pillar made of clouds reaching high into the atmosphere. As we approached the peculiar feature it resolved into a great, slowly rotating whirlwind. It was not at all like the funnel storms that could be seen on Earth, for this disturbance was both much wider and much slower. It stood in one place churning up a circular cloud of dust.

Tamla cursed loudly and then called back to me "It is the road to *Dhaimira!*"

Before I had a real chance to mull over the unusual statement, we were sucked into the whirlwind. It was at that time that the flying creature seized the opportunity to shake me free of his tail. Without warning, I was falling freely through the air. Tamla held tightly to the winged monster as he dove straight for the ground. I dove afterward knowing that my only hope for staying alive was to once again grab onto the beast's tail or some other part of him.

After a short time it occurred to me that we should have long since hit the ground but we simply kept falling. The swirling storm around us had grown progressively darker and its rotation ever slower. I realized now that the sensation of plummeting was being replaced by one of floating.

In the distance, far below me I still could see Tamla astride her abductor. To my horror, I observed her to pull a sword from her harness and drive it to the hilt into the torso of the creature. This was an act of insanity, plain and

simple. Up until this time, at least she had had a slim chance of surviving this strange ordeal, but now she had slain the only thing in the air with us capable of independent flight.

Then something even stranger happened. Tamla kicked free of the creature and started to rise upward toward me. I suddenly found myself disoriented and dizzy. I had thought that she was below me, while now I seemed to be sure that I was below her and we were both somehow rising although the direction of our motion had not altered in the least.

Tamla slowly worked her way toward me until she was able to grasp my hand. I asked her "What was that creature?"

"His name was Ranth Lankos. He was a *jomad* in the employ of Savjoda."

"I see." I said. It was an absolute lie, I had no conception of what she was talking about. For the time, I brushed off that answer and asked another question. "Do you know what is happening to us?"

"We are passing through the doorway to Dhaimira."

Before I could elaborate on my question, we suddenly burst into full daylight. We were soaring into the sky above a rolling blue sea as might be seen on earth but never upon dry Barsoom! We reached an elevation of some five hundred feet before we started to fall toward the water. A fall from such an altitude would surely have killed us on Earth, but under the lesser gravity of Barsoom, which seemed lesser still in this particular place, we only had the wind knocked from us as we struck the water of the warm sea.

The dead body of the jomad precipitated into the water near us and we were able to hang onto it for floatation while we got out bearings. we both espied a nearby island and started to kick that we would propel ourselves toward it. I was slightly surprised to see that Tamla was aquatinted with the art of swimming which is an almost unheard of skill among the children of dry Barsoom.

Upon reaching shore, we rid ourselves of the hideous corpse and then both fell into an exhausted slumber there on that alien beach.

I knew not weather it was morning or afternoon when I awoke, for the lighting was exactly the same as when I fell asleep. I surveyed my surroundings while I sat. I looked out on a calm ocean which seemed to have no horizon. Scanning the sky, I saw a number of colors which varied quite a bit from the standard shades of blue and cloud. There were a great variety of muted greens and browns which made me realize that it was land, not sky that I looked out upon. It was another inside out world but notably unlike either Vah-Nah or Pellucidar, both of who's vistas I was well familiar with.

Tamla was nowhere to be seen but she soon appeared with the body of a small scaly, multi-legged animal that looked like it might well have been a

cross between a rat and a millipede. "Welcome to Dhaimira." She said in matter of fact tones.

"Dhaimira. Within Barsoom?"

"Yes, another world sheltered within Barsoom."

I now looked upon Tamla of Helium carefully for the first time. I knew her to be sixteen or seventeen (Earth) years of age, but she carried herself with a sureness that belied her extreme youth. She was really quite a beautiful girl, a quality that was in no way lessened by the fact that she affected the harness and metal of a man. Along with a full sized sword, she wore a dagger and a radium pistol like a warrior of old. In the days some thousand years past when John Carter first appeared on Barsoom, it was the manner in which all men accoutered themselves. Today, at least in the great cities, most men would go about unarmed, which would have been unthinkable in olden times.

The girl continued. "I have been here before. The opening we came through was not there before, nor was the one that I accidentally was drawn into it when I came too close attempting to investigate it with a flyer. Savjoda has a method of opening a "road" as he calls them, almost wherever he needs one. Four months I spent in this strange world and I discovered that a plot of supreme evil was underway instigated by some of the inhabitants of this unknown region.

Savjoda, "The Conqueror" as he arrogantly styles himself, has aroused the Jomad tribes with the promise of untold riches on the surface world of Barsoom. Dhaimira, as this inner world is known, has no metals. Even a tiny scrap of iron is worth a king's ransom. The steel of my sword is worth the entire treasury of a great nation in this world. Savjoda has neglected, in a calculated fashion, to tell his jomad minions that Barsoom regards water almost as highly as Dhaimira regards metal, for his true goal is to rule both the inside and the outside of this planet!"

"Ha!", I said. "A small chance he will have against John Carter!"

"The blood of John Carter runs also in my veins! It has occurred to me that I might solve this problem on my own without the help of the Jeddak." I must admit that I found myself liking this feisty girl. She was ready to take on a whole world on her own, so great was her craving for adventure! Nonetheless, she was obviously more full of youthful exuberance than wisdom.

"Do you think that a young lass, even in the metal of a fighting man, can stop this 'Savjoda' person?" The humor of it brought to me a welcome laugh in this otherwise dire situation.

I instantly regretted my words when I saw the effect that they had had on Tamla. Her cheeks flushed and her eyes ran with tears of anger. She unbuckled her harness and cast it aside leaving herself wearing naught but her flawless copper colored skin. Now I could see that beneath her perfect and delightful feminine curves was a wiry musculature, which would have served any warrior quite well.

"I will fight you hand to hand in only our skin and you shall see what kind of a warrior this 'young lass' is!"

I was taken aback. "A gentleman would never deign to fight a lady in such a way, certainly not a princess!" said I.

Her high pitched voice lowered to a growl. "You are a gentleman and a prince. I am a lady and a princess. I am in every way your equal." And then in a voice of command, "Strip!" The girl, it seemed, would feel dishonored if I did not comply with her bizarre demand.

I removed my clothing and stood toe to toe with the girl who barely reached my shoulder. I promised myself that I would treat her carefully. I only needed to hold her down and that I should take care not to humiliate her without necessity. I merely had to teach her a much needed lesson. Before I was done thinking these thoughts, I found myself on my back in the sand. she now straddled my supine form and rained blows upon my face and chest. It was only with great effort that I was able to throw her off the first time. Again we stood toe to toe now half squatting in a wrestler's stance. I resolved to be more careful this time. She had obviously caught me off guard. With lightning speed a heel made contact with my solar plexus and I folded in the middle. As I gasped for breath another blow struck me where my neck joined my head and I went face down on the beach. I found I could not raise myself because the little slip of a girl now sat on my back and was twisting my arm up behind my neck.

"Cry for mercy!" She ordered, but again I managed to throw her off. I though I had her pinned a few moments later, but a well calculated thrust from her knee distracted me long enough for her to gain her freedom. While I grappled with the girl I was constantly struck by the strange feeling of the uncompromising strength of her muscles which rippled beneath her soft and sweet smelling skin. In truth, I am sure that the prolonged contact with that skin caused me more than once to lose a throw from lack of concentration.

And so it went for the better part of an hour, neither one of us being able to best the other. At long last we both collapsed covered with scratches and bruises and drenched in sweat. I think that each had a respect for the other that had been lacking before. She was no longer just a silly teenager to me and, I believe, I was no longer just a pampered prince to her. The truth I had

to face was that I was nearly twice her size and could not best her. It was she who possessed the greater skill.

After we had caught our respective breaths, Tamla silently set herself gutting the small creature she had killed for dinner. She impressed me by expertly striking fire with the steel of her sword and a pebble she picked up from the beach. When cooked, the animal tasted like a combination of lobster and mutton. Tamla said it was known here as a vrodak. It lived the first part of its life like a fish in the sea, but it came out on land to breed where it deposited its eggs in trees. This one was a hatchling, a full grown one would be about the size of a sheep.

We stayed on the island for a period of time that would have been a day and a night had the Sun ever set, but, like the luminous orb of Pellucidar, it hung forever motionless at zenith.

On the second day I saw a flock of birds winging toward our island and pointed it out to Tamla.

"There are no 'birds' in Dhaimira." She said. "Those are a party of jomads."

Without any real consciousness of the act, we reached out and clasped each other's hands as we watched them grow ever closer.

Chapter 3

Jomads

They alit smoothly hitting the beach at a run. Both Tamla and I were well trained in meeting strangers and put on our most regal poses. Were we not of the ruling class of our respective worlds?

About fifty feet from us they slowed to a walk and the two at the outermost flanks drew pistols but didn't point them at us.

The winged men were dressed in tight fitting trousers with wide leather belts. From those belts were suspended a variety of weapons and tools, not all of which I could easily identify and none of which were made from metal. In fact, they wore no metal save for some tiny pieces that were set like jewels in bone, wood or ceramic ornaments. When standing, the wings of the jomads folded neatly against their backs giving them the look of having a curiously elongated torso. The tails were held aloft with the fin at the tip being pressed into service as a sunshade. They stood about 10 feet tall each and showed a clear relationship to the green men of the surface world in the general structure of their faces and bodies. The face of the jomads had

the same large side positioned eyes and tube like ears as the green men as well as their slot like nostrils. The major difference was that their tusks pointed outward sideways from their faces or, as was the case with two of those in this group, downward and curled like a ram's horns. This was, in fact, the style of tusks worn by the one who addressed Tamla.

"Tamla of Helium. You have been returned to us, but you seem to have a new aspect about your person." The language was perfectly ordinary Barsoomian.

Tamla eyed the jomad with an arched brow. "You will find that I am not merely the soft and frightened girl you remember, Jos Gantos. I am a warrior now."

The jomad gave a deep and resonant laugh. "Savjoda will be pleased! He will acquire a little warrior as well as a wife!"

"*Wife!*" I exclaimed.

"So he might wish." Said Tamala in a deeply sarcastic tone.

"And Savjoda, the conqueror of Dhaimira, and very soon, Barsoom, gets what he wishes." He then looked about the beach. "Where is Ranth Lankos?"

"He has been repaid for the many insults he chose to favor me with." The princess lip was curled in contempt.

The jomad turned his eyes toward me. "You will be executed for killing a member of Savjoda's guard."

"Pardon?" I queried. I wondered just how quickly the sentence was to be carried out.

"It was I", Said the princess, "that ran a blade through the brute's heart." The jomad looked puzzled. This is the time I chose to speak up. "She killed him because he abducted her from the city of Helium against her will!"

The winged man struck me across the face and I fell to the ground. "Never." He said. "Never presume that Savjoda acts other than properly! If he commands the presence of any person, then that person must be brought into his presence."

With that, Tamla and I were lifted from the ground and into the sky by the band of jomads. Tamla was cradled in the arms of one of them while I was merely dangled by my wrists.

Thankfully the trip was only a few miles to a neighboring island. The island was smaller than the one that we first landed on but much more densely populated. The tiny piece of land, less than a square mile, I estimated, had several hundreds of jomads milling around on it.

We were placed down among a knot of the flapping and shouting creatures. Most of them differed significantly from the members of the party which had picked us up. They were obviously female and many of them

were pregnant. In this regard, they were different from all other humans on Barsoom which typically laid eggs which hatched almost fully developed young. Many of the jomad females had something that was never seen on this world, that being helpless infants at the breast.

Tamla and I were placed into a cage that had bars made from a very dense wood behind one of the tents that the jomads used for homes. We were both stripped of every metal object on our persons which left me having to hold up my trousers by hand for lack of a belt buckle and my shoes were now held on with twisted lengths of twine. Tamla, on the other hand was left virtually nude. Actually, I think in this case "naked" is the more appropriate term. She looked helpless and terrified without her harness and weapons and sat hugging herself in a corner of the cage. For the first time, she really looked like a young girl in need of my protection. The feisty posturing was gone.

"Tamla", I said. "The situation looks hopeless, we are the prisoners of a band of grotesque horrors! Furthermore, all of Barsoom is soon to be overrun by the armies of this Savjoda person and no one on the surface even suspects that they exist! The only force at work to stop them is a pampered prince and a girl barely more than a child, both of whom are imprisoned in this cage who's fates are virtually sealed! I will most likely be killed and you shall be forced into a life of cocubinage!" I rolled my eyes and hung open my mouth in a comic imitation of utter fear. "What would John Carter say in a situation like this?"

The girl looked up at me and cracked a slight smile through her tears. I smiled back and that was all it took for her to laugh out loud. "I still live!" She proclaimed grandly. We both laughed then, the emotional tension of our situation somewhat eased, at least for the moment.

The jomads milled about and fought over the pieces of metal which they had stolen from us. At one point a couple of rather ugly brown fish that were distinguished by having two tails each were tossed into our cage. They were uncooked and we were hungry enough not to care.

I asked Tamla to fill me in on as much as she could about Dhaimira and what was going on here.

"Savjoda has told me some things and I have picked up other parts of the story from some of the jomads.

"Dhaimira is, in many ways, a new world. Over a million years ago, the Orovars discovered it and made contact with its native civilization. The entrance at that time was beneath one of the oceans and a special ship, one which was equipped to travel underwater, was used to cross from Barsoom into Dhaimira. An Orovar general named Donak Jotar decided to make

himself Jeddak of all Dhaimira and moved a great force of men into the interior world. Over a period of one hundred years, Donak Jotar's army wiped out the civilization which ruled the islands of this world. His brutality was legendary and the Orovars exiled him to Dhaimira never to return to the surface of Barsoom. Without the metals and technology of the surface world, Jotar's people fell into savagery and lost the ways of farming. All they could do to support themselves was catch fish which they had to do by hand because they had no metal hooks. As time went on, the fish learned to avoid the waters closest to the islands inhabited by these people and they were forced to swim farther and farther out to sea to catch their food. Those who could not perfect great swimming skills drowned, while those who did, lived to have many children. After many thousands of years, these people came to have webbed hands and feet and the ability to actually breath underwater. after somewhat longer, they stopped returning to land altogether. Their descendants are now known as the darmayoks or fish men. They were the only people on Dhaimira up until five hundred years ago.

"Savjoda came into Dhaimira around that time. He is a Jasoomian like John Carter and like the Jeddak, he is also ageless. He once told me that because of peculiarities of his up bringing, the specifics of which he never acquainted me with, he had never been fully comfortable with his own kind. He came here , and using the knowledge of great scientists, engineers and doctors of the past, he set out to create a world which would be his and his alone.

"He populated the islands with animals from the surface and also with animals brought from Jasoom. There are islands where the wild thoats browse side by side with elephants and where tigers compete for the same prey as banths. He has an almost Barsoomian rapport with animals. I do not believe that he actually possesses our telepathic ability, but I think he has something just as good. Even a maddened zitidar will do his bidding when he calmly asks it. To help him maintain things in this world, he used an ancient technology perfecting the work of the great Ras Thavas to create a synthetic race of caretakers, the jomads. For the first century or so, every other jomad child was a horrible monster, but ceaseless experimentation finally led him to a strain that bred true. In time he created two other races to help him build this world.

"He would visit the surface every so often to find out about the affairs of men, but rarely stayed too long, mostly because he could not afford to have John Carter find out that he was here on Barsoom and discover the existence of Dhaimira."

The girl was now becoming animated in her narrative. "I m sure that at first, his motives might have been noble, but at some point, he became consumed with his own power in this world. All in Dhaimira answered to him and he had to answer to no one. Savjoda is the god of this world." How did this Earth man come to be on this world? How was it that men from my planet had come to have such impact on the history of Barsoom? First John Carter, then the great warrior and surgeon Vad Varo and now, it seems that this man called Savjoda has called Barsoom his home for centuries. If we could not break the bars of this cage I would soon find out.

Breaking free was the problem of the moment and the solution presented it self in an unexpected form. One of the fish which had been our meal had a length of tough sinewy fiber running along its spine. Tamla saw this and extracted it discovering in the process that no amount of pulling would part it. Stretched to its full length and pulled taught, it took on all the characteristics of a piano string.

When the lucky jomad who had become the owner of her sword came by to check on us, he saw Tamla lying supine clutching her stomach. I called to him. "Help! One of the fish must have been poisonous! Please help her!"

"This is just a trick." Said the jomad.

At this point I was called upon to do some of my best acting. "Yes. Of course, why should care? She is Savjoda's bride, not yours." I saw all of his thought processes reflected in an instant on that ugly face. He had a very clear idea as to what form Savjoda's wrath might take. He cautiously reached in through the bars to poke Tamla gently with the sword. It was at that moment Tamla sat up and threw the length of fish gut with one end weighted with a bone from the fish to loop around the jomad's arm. I grabbed the other end and both Tamla and I pulled with all our might.

The jomad's hand, sword and all, was neatly severed from his wrist, which started fountaining blood. His bellow of shock and pain was cut short when I picked up the fallen sword and ran it through his throat.

As quickly as we could, we chopped through the bars. In a short time, we both stood again unrestrained on the ground. As I had lost my belt buckle, I found it convenient to discard my trousers and in their place fashioned a short kilt from the fabric of my shirt. My shoes, also useless without their buckles, I threw out as well. I was now almost as naked as Tamla, but in what little garment I had, I could move without danger of tripping.

Our next problem would be to find our way off the island before the jomads noticed that we had gotten free.

Chapter Four

The Open Sea

We fled into a thickly forested area right behind the camp. It was not large at all, maybe a few hundred square yards. It could not be long before the jomads discovered our escape and their dead compatriot. We could expect them to be searching for us in an hour or less. The stand of trees ended abruptly at a sheer cliff against which waves broke some hundred or so feet below. It looked like this was our only rout off the island.

Among the strange vegetation of this forest were some of the most peculiar trees I had ever seen. This particular species grew its woody trunk in the form of a great bowl, which separated into branches as it grew upward. This tree, which grew on islands in a vast salty sea had evolved a very efficient way of holding onto fresh water. Its leaves were so constructed as to direct rainwater into the great bowl shaped depression that in some of the trees formed a good sized pond. It was almost like a forest of leafy champagne glasses.

Seeing these trees gave me an idea. I knew that if we attempted to merely float away from the island on a log, we would quickly be spotted by jomads on the wing, that is, unless we could contrive some way of being invisible from the air. The unique design of this flora provided that exact thing. Taking turns so that we might provide maximum constant effort, Tamla and I felled one of the bowl trees using her sword like an axe. The tree spilled a large amount of stinking, sludge filled water as it came down. It was our good fortune that the bowl shaped section didn't break when it hit the ground.

After trimming off the branches, using all the effort we could muster, we inched the great mass of wood up to the edge of the cliff. We then cut two logs each large enough to float one of us. First the logs and then the great wood bowl went over the cliff and started to drift out to sea. Holding hands, Tamla and I jumped after them.

It took only a few strokes in the water for us to catch up with the drifting wood.

Tamla said, looking at the cup like tree floating on the waves, "This will make a fine boat, Julian, but the jomads will see us easily."

"Not the way I have it planned."

I had her help me invert the tree trapping a large amount of air underneath and then we slid the two logs underneath as well. Finally, we ourselves

followed. Now we floated on the water with a wooden dome over our heads. The tree floated rather low in the water. "Now we look just like a piece of flotsam that no one would look twice at.

It was in fact harder than it sounded. All of our strength was consumed holding the wooden camouflage upright and we had to take frequent rests from our kicking that we were using to drive ourselves forward. Furthermore, we had to stop from time to time to tip the bowl tree up to admit fresh air at the risk of exposing ourselves. This was done by one of us first swimming underneath the water just beyond our "boat" and checking the sky for jomads. Having seen that all was clear, we would tip the thing over to float open side up and then turn it back over trapping as much air underneath as possible. One or the other of us also had to make occasional trips outside to check our direction and look for land.

Checking our direction was problematic. We had no compass and the sky of Dhaimira had no stars by which to navigate. Tamla informed me that Dhaimiran navigators used cloud formations to find their way and they would also use powerful telescopes due to the fact that every spot in this world was visible save for that small area which was on the opposite side of the sun. While it was true that clouds at one time or another would obscure much of the surface, one could still tell, if one had the proper skills, that is, what sorts of clouds form over land and which over water. These, regrettably, were not skills possessed by either my companion or myself.

Tamla hoped to spot one of the "continents" of this world called Keltrolna. Keltrolna was actually an island which was a little larger than all of the Japanese isles put together. It was the second largest single body of land in Dhaimira. More importantly, it was mostly uninhabited.

Tamla thought she had spotted its distinctive outline on the second day of our escape and since that time we had been trying to drive ourselves in that direction. The clouds seemed to indicate that there was a current which might propel us toward it some miles ahead.

We had now spent over four days either partially or entirely submerged in water and it was draining our energy. We were able to catch, but not cook various fish and crustaceans as well as a certain type of fleshy mollusk that proved to be something of a delicacy. Tamla said it was called *froi-ayk*, and that it was a favorite food of the darmayoks.

I had been wondering if we would see some of these darmayoks on this journey. I wondered if I wanted to. Tamla had never met any, and therefore she could not tell me if they were prone to friendly relations or not.

My curiosity was to be satisfied with unexpected celerity.

We had reached such a distance from the island that I decided turning the tree bowl side up and getting in above the water would have benefits which would outweigh the risks. Now we were dry, but also constantly exposed to the never setting sun. For Tamla, and other red Barsoomians, this was not a great problem, for the copper colored pigment in their skins protected them from sunburn. My fair skin, however, took little time before it started to redden to an alarmingly different shade from that of the princess. I spent some time scouting about for anything that might be pressed into service as a sun-shade. As luck would have it We found some floating weeds which rather closely resembled the giant kelp of Earth, which I was able to weave into an imperfect, but serviceable cover for about half the open area of our makeshift boat.

We were still, I estimated, several days away from encountering the current which we hoped would carry us to the shores of Keltrolna. Both Tamla and I were suffering from dysentery, malnutrition and the effects of exposure to the elements. The only way for us to provide any impetus at all to our voyage was to get out and push by kicking in the water, but as the days wore on, we had less and less strength to spare for that endeavor.

On what I guessed was our twelfth day out, we saw lights in the water moving in patterns. They came closer to our little craft and I could now see that the lights were some sort of glowing objects held by creatures of some sort.

I croaked to Tamla. "Darmayoks!" She lay asleep beneath the shade and I had to call to her twice more before she bestirred herself. By the time she got to the side to look over, the fish men were quite close enough for me to see the whites of their eyes. That was still a bit of a distance, but their eyes were very large.

The creatures were clearly related to men, but the features of their faces were quite inhuman. Their teeth were long and very thin and they had several closely packed rows of them. Their faces had no nose on the front but there was an opening near the crown of the head which I later would learn served that function. They had no external ears at all. Their skin was glossy white and utterly smooth and they had instead of feet, broad flippers. There was only one free toe, that being elongated and very muscular. When swimming, the darmayoks locked those two toes together fusing the feet into a single powerful fluke, which could drive them through the water at great speeds. Their arms were boneless and tentacle like, dividing into fingers near the tips. The number of finger varied from individual to individual.

Before we could count to ten, they surrounded our little craft. Being so weak from our ordeal, we made no protest as two of them pulled themselves aboard. They examined both of us closely, almost insultingly so.

After they satisfied themselves regarding our condition, one of them produced a large dipper and ladled up a generous portion of water from over the side. Into this he sprinkled a few drops of liquid from a container on a thong around his neck and then handed it to me. I started to refuse, thinking that he was ignorant of the fact that I could not drink brine when I saw something wondrous. The salt had solidified and precipitated to the bottom of the dipper. Tasting the water, I found that it was as fresh as if it had come from a mountain stream. I gave it to Tamla who drained it and another similar then I did likewise.

The darmayoks didn't speak the standard Barsoomian language although Tamla said that some of their words sounded somewhat familiar, but very archaic.

It was lucky for us that Tamla had a talent for art. Using the tip of her sword, she laboriously etched a map of the nearby regions of Dhaimira. She then marked the island of Keltrolna with an X and indicated her best estimate of our current position and drew a line to show that Keltrolna was our destination.

It took some time, but they were finally made to understand and somehow made us to understand that they intended to help us. Strangely, the fabled Barsoomian telepathic facility did not seem to work here within Dhaimira, so Tamla was restricted to what she could understand and explain in words and gestures. I remembered that Barsoomian visitors to Pellucidar and Vah-Nah reported experiencing the same sort of thing. Perhaps there was some sort of radiation from the internal sun that suppressed it.

Centuries ago, scientists had learned that the internal luminous orbs of the inside worlds were not stars like the greater sun which sits at the center of our swarm of worlds. The suns of Vah-nah and Pellucidar cannot be approached even in heat proof flyers. There is a barrier of violent winds of luminous gas which confuses instruments and damages ships. We do know that these orbs are quite small and cannot possibly produce their light and heat by violently smashing atoms together in the same way that the Sun does. For instance, the sun of Pellucidar has been measured to be somewhat less than one and one half miles in diameter.

The asteroid belt that fills an orbit between Barsoom and Eurobus is known to be the remains of a world whose internal sun exploded some million years ago. The event was documented by Barsoomian astronomers at the time but it was not until our modern age that the reason for the calamity

was uncovered. Impressive cultures had inhabited both the inside and the outside of that world and their scientists knew in advance of the impending tragedy. Explorers from Earth and Barsoom found fragmentary records of those peoples among the asteroids and discovered that they had intended to leave their world and colonize Barsoom or Eurobus. There is no evidence that they succeeded.

The darmayoks brought up to the surface several very large fish, which they attached to our poor raft with ropes, made from woven seaweed.

These "dray fish" were to be managed like a team of horses by a darmayok who mounted the lead fish and urged the team to pull. The rest of our companions dove back into the sea and we saw them no more as the last one drove the fish and us toward the shores of Keltrolna.

Chapter Five

An Instant of Night

Our rate of travel was greatly increased and before another two days (by my reckoning) had passed, we were in sight of the western coast of Keltrolna.

Unlike the islands that I had seen up until this point, Keltrolna appeared to be lushly forested and populated by a great variety of animals. Here, it looked like Tamla and I would be able to find food and water and plan our escape unmolested.

The darmayok bid us farewell and took his fishes back to the sea, leaving us on the shore all but naked and out only tool being Tamla's sword.

The problem of clothing was solved when we were able to ambush a couple of animals which were totally unfamiliar to Tamla, but quite commonplace to me, which made them all the more strange. They were

jackrabbits of a type quite common in North America, but to the Barsoomian lass, they were exotic indeed.

We spent several hours scraping the hides to make at least some brief clothing for ourselves, although I was much more concerned with this than was Tamla who had worn the vastly more revealing Barsoomian style clothing her entire life. She told me that, since she had abandoned the silks and jewelry of women, she had no use for clothing at all except for a sturdy weapons harness. She merely tied one of the rabbit hides into a diaper like garment that held to her hip a tube made from a bamboo-like reed, which served as a scabbard for her sword. To tell the truth, I had had mixed feelings about her covering herself anyway.

I myself made a loincloth from some of the hide and then set to work cooking the meat which was tender and delicious.

We slept for the first time since our appearance in Dhaimira in shade and well fed.

I awoke with a start. We were in pitch darkness. All around were the panicked cries of the animals. Before I was even fully awake, a new light had brightened the sky, but it wasn't the sun.

Tamla touched me gently and I twitched from surprise. "Savjoda is opening a road." She whispered.

"But what happened to the sun?"

"He uses the sun somehow. Its light and heat disappears when he creates a road and then reappears as it closes. Sometimes when a road is left open for too long and then is closed, there are mighty storms for days because of the sudden change in temperature all over the world at once."

As we watched in wonder a heatless swirling light infused the whole world and a broad beam shot toward a point on the surface across the world from us. Briefly, I saw the stars through a place that was once only blue sea, then suddenly the sun was back.

"Magic?" I asked.

"That, or a science so advanced that the difference between it and magic is unimportant. He does it with a machine bigger than one of the new atmosphere plants, and that is the part of it that rests on the ground. There is also a portion of it which orbits close about the sun like a small planet. They are in contact by radio."

Five hundred years ago, John Carter had commissioned three new atmosphere plants, each three times the size of the old one. Since that time, the Barsoomian environment had been improving dramatically. It had even been said that someday the seas might come back. Those plants were the largest machines ever built, or so I had thought up until now.

"This man wields great power. Perhaps he *can* conquer all of Barsoom." For the first time I had doubts as to the ability of even the unified forces of all who hold allegiance to John Carter to stand up against the power of this man who could extinguish and re-light the sun at will.

Savjoda, I thought, the name sounded Barsoomian, but Tamla said he came from Earth. He controlled several branches of what could only be described as "super science". Not only could he create his own people to do his bidding and move entire populations of animals across the gulf between worlds, he could also open holes in the planet and close them at will. I got a rather serious headache when I really thought about it.

I found myself wishing again and again for my watch which had been taken from me by the metal greedy jomads. Tamla and I could have lived in that primal and beautiful land for a week or for several months and I had no way of knowing.

The jungle was filled with animals of all sorts, Earthly, Barsoomian (although some were of types thought to have been long extinct) and some which I could only assume were native to Dhaimira. The Dhaimiran animals tended to have boneless appendages that were rather tentacle-like. Nonetheless, some of them were quite fleet of foot and had great manual dexterity as well. When hunting some of them, we had to be wary of our prey flinging stones at us to discourage their pursuit. One creature in particular, we were never able to catch. It was almost the size of a man with a trio of expressive eyes set in circle on its forehead. It had six limbs which served as either arms or legs. It was covered in fine bluish hair and had a large parrot-like beak. Because it spent most of its time swinging through the trees and giving forth with loud hoots, I named it an "ape-squid". We later learned that these creatures were quite social and, where there was enough food, they would live in large colonies.

The princess of Mars and the prince of Earth were becoming comfortable denizens of the jungle. Only on occasion did my mind return to the problem of *Savjoda* or did I worry about the fact that we were lost in a strange world, for in many ways, this jungle was the most idyllic of homes.

Tamla and I grew to have a deep unspoken communication and that in spite of the absence of her native Barsoomian telepathy. The more time I spent with her and building a strong partnership with her, I realized that my feelings had grown beyond mere friendship. Of course, in the absence of any way to formalize such a relationship, I felt it was best to keep my own council on the subject. In retrospect, I can now see that this was a mistake.

Without my knowledge, although, I have been told many times since that I must have been a fool not to see the signs, Tamla had come to see me in

much the same way that I saw her. Because of my reservations, however, she would find me remote whenever she tried to get close. Please remember that this was a young girl prone to all of the emotions that go with that condition, no matter how valiant a warrior she might also have been.

I started seeing in her behaviors for which I had no explanation. Over minor disagreements, she would suddenly become highly emotional sometimes bursting into tears and running off for hours at a time.

Strangely, or so I thought at the time, the edge of conflict which had seeped into our relationship ended suddenly and without explanation.

We had caught and killed an ulsio that had been periodically raiding our campsite for food and were discussing how its hide should be used. I had thought that several strong slingshots could be made from it while Tamla insisted that we needed to use all of it to repair holes in the small tent we used for storing food. She thought this fitting since it had been that very ulsio who had chewed those holes. It not being a matter of great import, and my dearly wishing not to experience another outburst from Tamla, I decided to yield the point to her as graciously as possible.

"It shall be as you say, my princess." I said. Her reaction was most unexpected. She had been looking down at the skinned carcass of the ulsio and her head snapped up, her eyes locking on mine.

"What did you say?" she asked. She had a slight smile working at the corners of her mouth.

For an instant, I thought I had once again found a way to anger her without trying. Resignedly, I sighed deeply and said. "I'm certain that you heard me correctly the first time, my princess." It was only on their repetition that the import of my words struck me. I felt the heat of a deep blush in my cheeks. I had learned many years ago that using the term 'my princess' was a declaration of love in the old Barsoomian custom.

Although I had caught myself off guard, I also knew that I had no regrets regarding what I had said, even inadvertently.

Gathering my wits as best as I could, I asked Tamla of Helium, "Might I borrow your sword for a moment?" Without a word, she removed it from its rustic sheath and handed it to me. I hefted the weapon for a moment and then laid it at her feet.

Chapter Six

Geography

In spite of the idyllic setting that my life now took place in, I could not forget that Savjoda was out there and planning the conquest of Barsoom.

Two more times, we witnessed the opening of roads to the surface world. Both openings were brief, too brief to allow a major invasion of the surface, but certainly things were happening. The most important thing was that these openings were reminders that Savjoda's plans moved forward while we did nothing.

In Dhaimira, as I have stated before, there are virtually no metals, yet somehow, we had to make the tools that would allow us to either escape this world or catch up with Savjoda. Barsoom is far older than Earth and the ways of the primitive much farther behind the Barsoomians than the inhabitants of Earth. It is for that reason that Tamla barely comprehended the concept of stone tools.

On Earth, even as recently as the reign of the Kalkars, men had chipped knives and axes out of flint, while Barsoom had lived in the age of steel for millions of years. Tamla reacted to my inept efforts of making tools from stone as if I had performed a magic trick.

It took me a few tries to make a useable axe-head, but I got quite a bit of practice due to the fact that they wore out quite quickly. The task of constructing a sturdy boat fell mostly to myself. Having been raised on the dry sea bottoms of Barsoom, the young princess understood little of the theory behind watercraft.

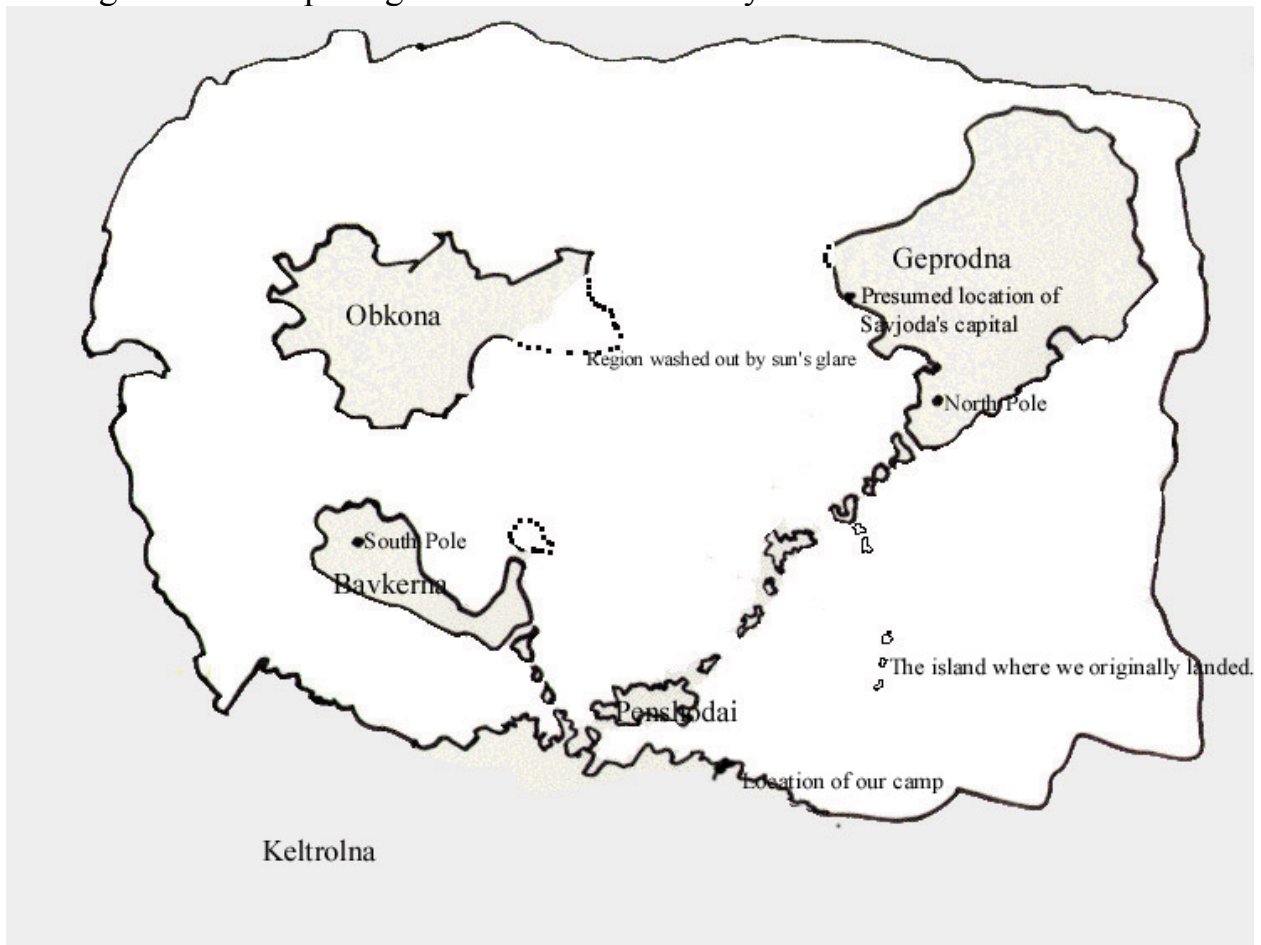
Over time, a seaworthy craft took shape. I cooked tree sap to pitch the hull and carved pegs to hold the boards together. The joined and pitched boards were then covered with animal hide as was a roofed enclosure inside the craft itself. I made a sail from large leaves sewn together. Tamla and I sailed on a few short excursions from our camp to survey the coast and work out problems with the boat's construction.

In spite of the fact that Keltrolna was quite small compared to any of Earth's continents, it was still of impressive size and variety. We spent some time exploring all along the western coast where we saw many wonders.

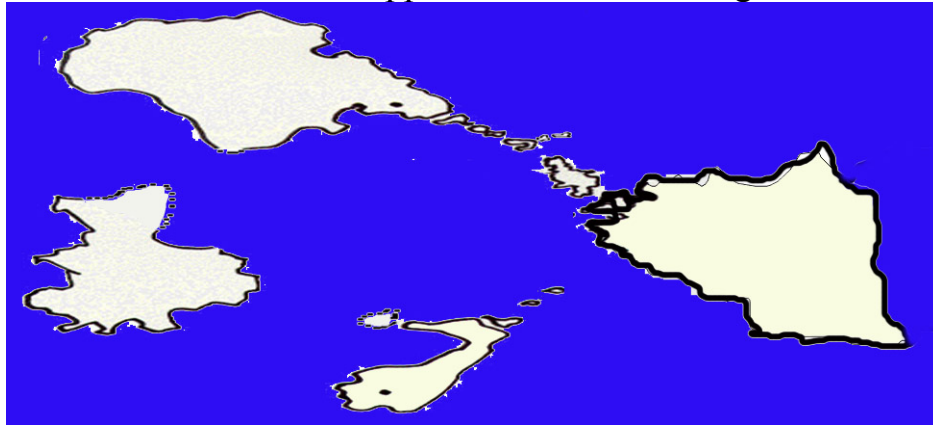
We had few really good choices for how we should proceed. Tamla thought that we should head into the South Polar region where she thought there might some sort of route into the Sea of Omean and from there we might reach the Sea of Korus. I, on the other hand thought that the course

most likely to succeed would be to make for Savjoda's capital and wait to see if we could get back when he next opens a road.

We devoted ourselves to the study of what might be called Dhaimiran "astronomy". We had to create a clear map of our world but we were subject to the sorts of limitations that were usually faced by astronomers, that is the vicissitudes of the weather. We also had no telescope although that was not too much of a handicap. Dhaimira's diameter is approximately three thousand miles making it only slightly larger than Vah-Nah. The shell of Barsoom was rather thicker by proportion than that of Earth, which encloses Pellucidar. The result of this was that the atmosphere was considerably easier to see through than that of Pellucidar. On the other hand, the sun effectively blanked out a larger portion of the sky than did the sun of Pellucidar. Luckily for us, our camp was located very near the equator and we were able to see both polar regions. We discovered two things. The first was that we could not tell with any certainty the direction of the planet's rotation, therefore, we remained unsure as to which pole was which. The second of which was the presence of land masses located over both poles making a direct sea passage to the surface unlikely.



This is a copy made from the first map we made in western Keltrolna. The land of Keltrolna can be seen to encircle all the other lands and waters, for this is how it appeared from our vantage.



this is the best surmise I could make of the actual shape of the lands of Dhaimira if they were to be laid out flat. Geprodna is at the top of the map and Keltrolna is on the right hand side.

We reluctantly determined that seeking out Savjoda offered us the best chance of escape. We had, through our geographical explorations found a place that we believed to be Savjoda's base of operations. It was almost on the exact opposite side of the world from us. This made me wonder why we entered Dhaimira where we did. Were there other plans for Tamla aside from those stated by the jomads?

I contrived a clock of sorts, really more like an ancient sand glass. It dribbled a stream of sand from one container to another over a period of approximately 4000 resting heartbeats. I arbitrarily decided to call a period where we reversed the containers twenty times a day and thirty of those periods a month. Both Tamla and I felt much better with a method of time-keeping, although now that we had one, we became aware of how fast the time was going by.

It took us half a month to prepare supplies for our voyage. They consisted of dried meats and wild vegetables and many skins filled with spring water.

The darmayoks had left us a vial of their water purification chemical, but we felt it was best to regard that as emergency stores. Also, the water skins made good ballast and helped keep the boat from rocking too far in one direction or the other.

We set out on a calm sea using only the map we had prepared for navigation. Frequent overcast weather made our progress slow and before more than

five days had passed, we were forced to land at the first island we saw to wait until we could get our bearings.

The island was lushly forested with the leafy cup trees, not unlike the one we made our escape from the jomads in, each with its own little pond. There was ample hunting and forage for us to eat well and replenish stocks as we needed.

Beyond the forest that lined the coast was a savanna interrupted by occasional trees and watering holes. The ground cover was both Earthly grasses as well as Barsoomian yellow moss, thus we were not overly surprised to see that the land was shared by elephants and wildebeest as well as wild thoats and zitidars. Here were also various beasts, which were of obviously Dhaimiran origin, some of which were too fleet of foot for us to get a clear look at. We also spotted lions and calots which convinced us that it would be better for us to return to the coastal forest.

After some time, we determined that we were on a large island that Tamla identified as Penshodai. This island sat at one end of an archipelago that reached all the way to Geprodna.

If we stayed in the region of these islands for our journey, we would always be near land and in shallow, warm waters, but we would also be more exposed to discovery by Savjoda s jomad minions. Even so, the limitations of our boat and our dependence on being able to see our destination militated against attempting a long voyage on the open ocean. Thus it was that we agreed to make our journey along the line of islands.

Chapter Seven

The Natives

We spent some time on Penshodai attempting to catalog animals and plants in hopes of making some sense out of the strange natural history of Dhaimira. While the great majority of animals were either Barsomian or Terrestrial, as well as native Dhaimiran, there were also examples of creatures from Amtor and some which simply didn't easily fit into any biology that I knew about. On one day we saw a tribe of vagas crossing the savanna. Unlike my dear friend Man-tan-ko, these vagas went about nearly nude and were armed with heavy clubs. While it was possible that they

might have been able to give us valuable information, they also looked dangerous enough that approaching them would have been imprudent. So far, of the intelligent life we had encountered in Dhaimira, only the darmayoks had shown us any civility therefore we were quite cautious no matter how much our curiosity might be peaked.

A few days before we were expecting to put out to sea again, we saw a remarkable sight. The tribe of vagas was again on the grassland beyond the forest, but on this occasion, they had strange creatures mounted on their backs. It was Tamla who reached the correct conclusion before I did.

"The vagas are slaves to those creatures." She said.

The vaga is an intelligent being native to Vah-Nah, which closely resembles the centaurs of Earthly myth. When humans first encountered them, they were barbarian tribes who survived on the nearly dead planes of Vah-Nah by cannibalism. That was centuries ago when that world was close to absolute death right before the Kalkar invasion of Earth. When Earth men returned to Vah-Nah, a program of wholesale land reclamation and irrigation along with many imported plants and animals restored that little world to something like its former glory. Today, the vagas are a farming and herding people who reap the rewards of the now rich soil of Vah-Nah. In Dhaimira, they apparently played a different role.

The creatures that were mounted on the vagas were unlike almost anything either Tamla or I had ever seen. Each one was more or less the size of a man and in that way alone they resembled humans. The body was a flexible cylinder that appeared to have no bony frame at all, for it seemed to be able to bend in any direction. There were eight tentacle-like limbs, the lower four of which served as legs while the upper four served as arms. The limbs were arranged in pairs that worked so closely together that they gave the appearance of having only two arms and two legs. The legs ended in oval pads while the arms terminated with pliant, spatulate manipulators resembling nothing so much as they did the trunk of an elephant. Each "hand" had three jointless fingers. The head was round and rather smaller looking than it seemed like it ought to be. There was no mouth, a pair of openings near the top which I thought must be ears and a recessed circle in the center of the face which contained three eyes. This head was set on a neck that could vary amazingly in length to the point that the creature could stretch to half again its height. They had brilliant pink skin that darkened to deep blue at the ends of the limbs and the top of the head. They wore clothing that was in rich colors and decorated with precious stones.

Looking upon these creatures, I realized that they bore the same relationship to the "squid-apes" that we had seen in Keltrolna, as do Earth men to the great apes of Africa.

As they coursed along the moss cover plane, they were accompanied by a mob of smaller creatures that dashed between the legs of the vagas. They were eight legged and had a behavior similar to that of hunting hounds. Loud honking calls issued from them, perhaps to help them find their way about with echoes like a bat, for they had no eyes. In my mind I named them "horn-dogs".

Although we took pains to remain hidden, the "horn-dogs" became aware of our presence and alerted the riders by pointing in the same manner as a dog from my home world might. The creatures turned their vaga mounts and galloped toward our hiding place. We turned to run only to find one of the hound-like horrors behind us. It blared a loudly raucous note and we were soon flushed into the open and surrounded by the riders.

Tamla drew her sword, but I signaled her to put it away. She understood. We were greatly outnumbered and she was *not* John Carter. Between us there was but a single sword. The mounted beings had what looked enough like weapons to warrant caution. They had not the sheen of steel, but swords still hung at their belts, as did peculiar triple barreled pistols. They appeared to be fabricated from some sort of stone.

Without protest we allowed one of the riderless vagas to lift us to his back with the knowledge that any other action could well cost us dearly.

One of the riders gave a curt order in a language I had never heard before and the entire party was in motion amidst the blaring and hooting of the horn-dogs. We were underway for most of an hour (as nearly as I could tell) when we reached a grouping of buildings which resembled in shape, but not size, a number of different sized kegs standing on end.

The Buildings were made from the same glossy material as the weapons. We were carried into one of the smaller buildings and deposited in a room where another of the tentacled creatures awaited us.

It looked us over speculatively, making a rather personal examination of the two of us. At one point, Tamla decided that the exam had become far too intrusive and drew her sword. A tentacle flashed almost faster than the eye could see to snatch the weapon from her hand.

"Steel." It said in clear Barsoomian. Its voice sounded like it was spoken by a hive full of bees.

Tamla gave a low, animalistic growl and made as if to leap at the creature. I held her back.

The creature continued. "This is enough steel to buy this city. You would do better for yourself in Dhaimira to sell it rather than fight with it."

"The value of good Heliumite steel", said Tamla, "is beyond any number of tanpi."

The creature made a strange sound, almost like a mechanical meshing of gears. Apparently this was its equivalent of a chuckle. "You should know that you are the guests of the Yan of Kotab."

"Kotab? Is that the name of your people?"

"We are called doyaks. Kotab is the only remaining doyak nation since the coming of Savjoda. We exist only as a small population now, but once, Dhaimira was our world."

I saw an opportunity to get more information about Savjoda. "Did he wipe out your people?"

"My people were almost extinct when Savjoda came. It was we who he first contacted in Dhaimira. He arrived in this world alone and naked and became its ruler and brought a nearly dead world back to life! The price has been that we have had to endure all of these alien creatures. They were necessary though, because so many of the Dhaimiran species had died out that life no longer had balance in Dhaimira, our world was in its last days. Savjoda now speaks of restoring the world which is above ours."

"Have you met this Savjoda?" I asked.

"It was at this very hive that he first appeared."

The creature continued to examine us and in the course of this examination, we discovered that its name was Fomas-67. "Fomas" apparently signified physician. He spoke several languages, a discipline which would have been unheard of on Barsoom. Barsoom has no linguists for the language of the surface world is universal and has been for thousands upon thousands of years. Fomas-67 spoke his native tongue as well as Barsoomian and to my surprise, The modern language of Earth as well as several dead languages such as French, English and a number of more obscure tongues from Asia (Chinese, Japanese and Malay) and Africa (Mande, Ibo, Bantu, Waziri). He also had some Amtorian as well as Kalkar and Vaga. How he knew these languages was mystery enough, but the question of why was even more so. Apparently this Savjoda was well traveled in the solar system and had shared much knowledge with the doyaks.

Fomas-67 Proved to be rather cordial. He had no axe to grind with us, he merely was under orders to examine any unusual life that his people came in contact with. Savjoda insisted that the doyaks do this because of their scientific turn of mind. They were in fact, a good deal more intelligent than

human beings. There was a reason for this, the doyaks had a brain that grew for their entire life and that lifetime was usually several thousand years. Fomas-67 was relatively young at fifteen hundred years.

I was curious as to how they kept track of time without any astronomical references.

"We created an artificial unit of time and built the Master Clock. It does more than merely keep track of passing time. It also can alter the relationship between time and space. A copy of the Master Clock is at the heart of Savjoda's mechanism for opening the roads between the worlds."

Tamla asked, How can a clock do that?

Fomas-67 answered patiently. The sun of our world is sort of a hole in space and time. Our scientists have found that any body of mass that is heavy enough will engender a doorway in space at its center of mass. The Moon of Earth is about the smallest a body can be to have this effect take place. The opening leads to the center of the greatest mass within a particular grouping of bodies, such as our solar system. In ours, that body is the Sun. As the worlds condensed from the primordial nebula they developed extra-dimensional openings into the center of what would become the Sun. When the Sun ignited there was a sudden flash of energy into those dimensional doorways. The primordial planets first melted from the heat and then swelled like balloons from expanding gasses until the interior of the bubbles had retreated far enough from the source of heat to cool back to a solid shell. This is how the worlds we know today were born. In the fullness of time, life was germinated on one or both surfaces of the bubble planets.

I freely admit that my mouth hung open upon hearing this. For centuries, the greatest minds of Earth, Barsoom and Amtor had devised theory upon theory to explain the entirety of the observed solar system, but all had seemingly insuperable flaws. When Pellucidar was discovered, Albert Einstein declared the existence of the internal sun flatly impossible and the internal world violated the predicted behavior of gravity in the light of his studies, thus he was obliged to start from scratch. He never arrived at a satisfactory theory to account for Pellucidar. By the time Vah-Nah was discovered Einstein was long dead, but the questions raised by the internal worlds were more alive than ever. For almost a thousand years it had remained one of the greatest mysteries of science, but the doyaks had known all along.

Savjoda was in the world called Pellucidar when he discovered that the direction of the doorways could be turned. We had known about it for quite some time and had used that fact to the advantage of our world. Our first experiment was to bring the Jasoomian, John Carter to the surface of

Barsoom. We knew that he was the person who would ultimately save that world from total environmental collapse. We needed a similar person in Dhaimira and would have brought one here, but because the roads let us see through time *and* space, we knew that he was going to find his way here on his own. That person was Savjoda.

Tamla now asked, How did you even know about other worlds if your race never saw the stars?

Again, Fomas-67 made the strange grinding gears sound. My race is not native to Dhaimira, although we have been here for many millions of years. We are descended from a colony from the world that was once known as Otala. Their civilization occupied both the inner and the outer surface of their world. It was the Otalans who first discovered how to redirect the space/time road at the center of the world. We believe that shortly after the colony was placed here, Otalan scientists started to experiment with varying the size of the road. Apparently, they succeeded to a greater degree than planned and the sun was suddenly greatly expanded in power. In less than a second, a civilization millions of years old was wiped out when the entire planet simply exploded. The remnants of Otala are the asteroids which orbit between Barsoom and Eurobus.

We could have asked Fomas-67 questions for hours, nay, days had we been allowed to, but it was not to be, at least for the moment. Two other doyaks appeared at the door to inform Fomas-67 that Savjoda had been informed of our presence and wanted us conveyed to him at once.

Chapter Eight

Things I didn't Know were Happening

In Helium, tensions were high.

John Carter, who was still distraught over the loss of his beloved wife, had also to contend with decaying relations between Earth and Barsoom. Julian 67th, jemdar of Earth was, in the words of the diplomats, "highly concerned" regarding the disappearance of his son. The feelings of the Terran President were more ominous. The longtime era of peaceful relations between Earth and Mars was threatened.

The jeddak had also to contend with the loss of Tamla, a favorite, but troubled descendant. Her mother, Delah Kodah, who was the great, great grand daughter of his own daughter Tara, appeared at court each day to

remind him that her daughter was still missing and his failure to find her. Tensions were also growing within his family.

Carter had sent missions out covering the entire planet, personally leading many of them until exhaustion threatened to claim him. To complicate things, he had gotten word that Ras Thavas, the so-called "mastermind" of Barsoom had vanished at the moment that he needed him most. Ras Thavas, the ever-elusive, two-thousand year old scientist had been sought to consult on the kidnapping of Tamla of Helium and the associated disappearance of Julian 68th the prince jemdar of Earth only for it to be discovered that he himself had vanished.

John Carter now sat alone in his apartments at the palace in Greater Helium, his grey eyes reflecting an infinite sadness. His beloved princess taken from him by age, his closest friends, Kantos Kan and Tars Tarkas and even his own son, Carthoris, elderly and no doubt soon to follow her and all the adventure having been slowly bled from his life, John Carter was faced with an unfamiliar emotion, that of feeling sorry for himself. In truth, any kind of introspection was more or less alien to his nature. Carter was far from unintelligent, but he was, in a way, uncomplicated. All he had ever asked from life was that he would be able to fight, laugh and love. His current life had no enemies to fight, no woman to love and little to laugh about. Curling his lip sardonically, he muttered, "I still live".

On Earth, The Jemdarate itself was in crisis. The President had now twice appeared before the parliament to argue against the continued royal succession. Never before had the heir to the throne been victim of such a crime as it now appeared had come to pass. While peace had been the rule between the two great empires, there had been some ongoing points of contention. Both planets claimed mining rights on Mercury. Barsoom had placed a colony on the surface of Earth's moon against the wishes of the Jemdarate. John Carter had stated that the Jemdarate only had claim to Vah-Nah, while the dead surface of the Moon was unclaimed. Also there was public discontent within the Jemdarate regarding the Barsoomian failure to abolish slavery. There was much made of the fact that the jeddak's previous allegiance, although over one thousand years ago, had been to a government which had revolted to preserve that very questionable institution. To now have an Earthly prince who was supposedly a guest of the Barsoomian government, vanish only added to existing tensions.

The Grand Council of Jeddaks met to discuss the rising tensions with Earth. They started plans for evacuating the Lunar colony and heavily armed ships were placed in orbit of Barsoom.

Earth openly sent an expeditionary force to Mars to "render aid" in the search for the princess Tamla and the prince Julian 68th. The Speaker of the Grand Council, Carthoris, jeddak of Helium declared that Barsoomian authorities required no help in the search and politely refused permission for the earth ships to come into Barsoomian orbit or to land on the surface. The President of the Jemdarate responded that their government would take a dim view of Barsoomian efforts to thwart Earth's attempt to recover the prince. John Carter was alarmed. Earth and Barsoom were rapidly heading into a dangerous situation that could easily escalate into war. This would not be the kind of war that was fought bravely hand to hand as a true warrior fights, but a war fought mostly at great distances with bombs and rockets that would claim the lives of many innocents and do nothing to test the metal of those involved. How easy it would be to lay low these two great civilizations! John Carter knew that he must prevent it, yet he had no means of doing so.

The expeditionary force of the Jemdarate fell into orbit around Mars challenged only by words, for John Carter and the Council had ordered that the first shot fired would not come from a Barsoomian. A single small vessel descended to the surface just outside of the gates of Greater Helium. From that vessel emerged seven men, one of them a diplomat in formal attire, six of them heavily armed soldiers. As they approached the city gate, a second, larger ship descended from the sky to alight about a haad away from the city. It was a troop carrier.

There was some dickering, but finally the diplomat with only two of his "honor guard" were admitted into Helium and into the chamber of the Grand Council of Jeddaks.

The diplomat, Jayman Zandrik by name, made what started out to be an impassioned appeal for the safe return of the prince, but also contained several references to a number of perceived slights against the Jemdarate. He informed the Council, and John Carter, for he had entered the chamber when he heard that Zandrik had arrived, that their efforts at finding the prince were woefully inadequate and their government felt it was best to take over the search themselves. Then he came out and said flatly that any attempt at interference by the Barsoomians would be treated as an act of war.

There was an explosion of voices within the council and in some cases, more than voices. Had not the jeddak of Warhoon been restrained (no easy job, it took fifteen red men to hold back that single green man), he would have instantly beheaded Jayman Zandrik for his temerity.

John Carter stood up, his face white with rage. This was not an emotion frequently seen in the normally cool-headed warlord. "Jayman Zandrik," he

began, "as you are empowered to speak for you government, so I am for mine. If it is your intention to end centuries of peace by bringing armed men to this world, you will not find us unready. While my people have lived in peace for a very long time, our national character was forged in warfare and knows it well. Engage us at your own great peril! This meeting has concluded." With those words, he stalked from the room followed by all the jeddaks. For a minute or so, Zandrik and his guards stood in the chamber alone. They had to return to the city gate on their own where they were escorted back to their ship. They were offered no hospitality in the city. As that day passed into night, word was gotten to the armies of Barsoom to get themselves to a state of maximum readiness. John Carter ordered that if anyone emerged from the larger ship it should be fired upon.

Just before dawn broke, John Carter was awakened. A message carried on a Gridley wave had been detected. The source could not be determined, but the content of the message was that Tamla and Julian were safe.

The jeddak was taken to the communications office in the palace and a recording of the message was played for him. The voice was that of a man. Clear and educated, it conveyed a sense of great assurance and purpose. "I hope that this communication may reach the ears of John Carter, warlord of Barsoom. I am Savjoda, of Earth, now lord of Dhaimira and I wish to inform you that princess Tamla of Helium and prince jemdar Julian 68th are well and healthy in my care. Do not fear for their safety."

A second voice then came on. "John Carter, I shall not have to identify myself as I am sure you know my voice well." Indeed he did, it was the voice of Ras Thavas, the so-called "mastermind" of Barsoom. While generally good-intentioned, Ras Thavas put learning above all things and did not always worry about how individuals might be effected by his actions. "I cannot describe to you the astonishing things which have come to light, but rest assured that the greatest discovery in the history of Barsoom has been made! We shall contact you again very soon."

That morning, Jayman Zandrik was summoned into a private audience with John Carter. He was expecting to receive either permission to deploy his troops or a declaration of hostilities. He certainly was not expecting to be played a sound recording from a strange personage named "Savjoda" claiming to be an Earthman now living in a place called "Dhaimira". Although greatly perplexed, he took a copy of the message and departed. That afternoon, both ships left the surface of Barsoom.

Chapter Nine

The Troubled Sky

Tamla and I were provided with clothing in the form of loose fitting shirts and tight fitting trousers not unlike those worn by the jomads only of a size and cut to fit our bodies. We and Fomas-67 were escorted by several other doyaks to a flyer on the flat roof of the largest of the buildings. The flyer was clearly of Barsoomian design, but the controls were all marked in English, an archaic language from earth, the handiwork of Savjoda, no doubt. To our surprise, Fomas-67 returned the sword to Tamla before we set off. He was, I am certain, quite able to take it from her again if she tried anything.

The doyak physician handled the flyer expertly and brought us to a very great height as we left the island of Penshodai behind us. We were heading in the direction of southern Geprodna where I had spotted something that looked like it might be a city when Tamla and I were engaged in our "astronomical" studies. I was smugly pleased that I seemed to have been right about that location's importance.

The flyer hurtled through the sky at incredible speed and it seemed that we would be in the presence of the man who stood at the center of these strange events when the unexpected transpired. The sun went out.

Fomas-67 made a rumbling noise deep within his torso signaling, no doubt, his disorientation. The disorientation was shared by all of us, for we could not tell up from down, the entire world had gone black. When we saw the "road" appear emerging from where the sun once was, we realized that we were descending toward the sea in a spiral.

Once there was a source of light, Fomas-67 was able to straighten out our flight path. He said, "Something is amiss. Savjoda usually keeps our community apprised as to when he opens a road. This opening is unscheduled.

Tamla was still catching her breath from the tailspin. "What does that mean?" she asked.

"I m not certain. Perhaps some kind of emergency prompted the need or perhaps Savjoda is no longer in control of the machinery. We cannot be sure until we reach his city."

Blue Barsoomian sky appeared momentarily where once there was a patch of sea and then once again they were plunged into darkness. In a few

seconds, the sun again ignited. Fomas-67 decided to continue toward the western coast of Geprodna so that we might find out what had happened. It wasn't, it turned out, going to be that simple.

They were just dots at first, mere flyspecks in the distance, but they quickly resolved into clarity. Jomads in a "V" formation like migrating geese on Earth. Fomas-67 quickly turned the flyer to avoid the flock and we immediately saw that another was approaching us from the left, only this one was much closer, less than half a mile distant.

The speed of the flying jomads was unexpectedly swift. They were almost upon us in a matter of seconds. Fomas-67 turned the flyer toward them with the intent of ramming his way through. Two jomads were killed instantly as the flyer's prow struck them but we were boarded by two more who drew pistols. Tamla drew her sword only to have it struck from her hand by a jomad. It dropped to the bottom of the flyer with a ringing clatter. Another jomad fired his pistol into the instrument panel of the flyer destroying it utterly. The flyer instantly started spinning. One of the jomads seized Tamla and lifted her from the disabled flyer as she kicked and cursed them. We were ignored as soon as they had Tamla. The jomads flew off, completely indifferent to our plight as we plummeted to the sea.

I watched helplessly as the jomads disappeared into the distance with my true love, indeed, the anguish caused by that sight momentarily made me forget that I had only seconds remaining in my life, for the sea was rushing up at the crippled flyer with alarming speed. Fomas-67 had not given up. He was tearing into the ruined guidance mechanism with deft and swift movements of his boneless hands. We were a mere fifty feet above the rolling ocean when the mechanism of the flyer suddenly sprang back to life throwing the both of us off our feet. Our descent was slowed enough that we hit the water only softly and then started to rise again. The flyer was only able to stay about five feet above the water and move forward at only a snail's pace, but it would get us to an island alive, which was decidedly better than the alternative.

Three days later, we arrived at a large island that Fomas-67 identified as Omporoi, once the home of an important doyak nation. Its inhabitants had been wiped out in a war that had taken place over fifty thousand years before. Fomas-67 believed that Savjoda now used it as a preserve for otherwise extinct animals.

The flyer failed us while we were still a mile off shore and came to rest on the surface whereupon it started taking on water. We could not allow it to sink or we would be stranded. Even if we could not repair it, the metal in it could be used for tools and/or trade given that there was none to be found

elsewhere in Dhaimira. We therefore, had to get out and swim while bearing it up until our feet could touch bottom.

We dragged the flyer as high onto the pebbly beach as we could before we took in our surroundings. This island was unfamiliar to the doyak who, although was well versed in the wonders of the greater cosmos, had traveled little on his own world save for trips from one major enclave to another. It turned out that his chauffeuring Tamla and I to Geprodna was the first lengthy trip he had made in over one hundred years.

To our right was a forest of broad leafed trees including the ubiquitous cup trees found, it seems, all over Dhaimira's islands. To our right was a broad savanna that reached many miles into the distance. At a point which would have been over the horizon had we been on the surface, that savanna again gave way to forest and then, once more, the sea.

I retrieved Tamla's sword and determined to find a meal. Fomas-67 agreed that we needed food so we set out into the savanna. I had seen in the distance, what looked a lot like wildebeest, and I thought that I might be able to bring one down. Fomas-67 was entirely unversed in the art of hunting and his inhuman odor, while barely noticeable to myself, seemed to be quite alarming to the animals. I urged him to return to the beach and allow me to fetch dinner on my own. He agreed and I was left to stalk the herd without causing undue commotion.

About two minutes after he had left I heard a loud and strange sound that could only have come from the doyak. It was rather like a combination of a bell ringing and a cricket chirping. I turned around and was greeted with a singularly unnerving sight. Fomas-67 was surrounded by five of the most fearsome creatures I had ever set eyes on. They were four legged and covered with bristly spotted fur. Their eyes shined with an unnatural light and their fanged mouths slavered with an insatiable lust for blood. They gave forth with voices that sounded like some demonic gibbering. They were an apparition from an earlier age, a horrid creature thought to have been extinct for hundreds of years. When they had lived on my world, they were known as *hyena*.

By the time I was able to reach him, he was surrounded. Considering that he was completely unarmed, he gave quite a good account of himself. His tentacles functioned as effective whips that allowed him to keep the hideous beasts at a distance.

I was gasping for breath as I came up behind one of the yipping horrors. I struck off its tail with a swipe from the keen-edged sword. The monster let forth a frightful ululation and turned upon me with the intent to instantly punish me. With all my might, I drove the point of the sword between the

evil thing's eyes. The others had seen the brief battle and quickly left Fomas-67 for their new foe, but when they saw my swift dispatch of their fellow, they reacted not with a need for vengeance, but set upon its still twitching corpse tearing it to pieces.

Fomas-67 and I fled as the creatures quarreled over gobbets of their brother's flesh. Killing that beast didn't require any great feats of swordsmanship, only the nerve to do it. Heaven only knew what else might be required of me during our sojourn on this island. I tarried for a moment to look once more upon the beasts as they savaged the corpse of their own kith and kin, praying that it would be the worst I would see.

Over time, we discovered that the African veldt that once was still existed here. Prides of lions hunted zebras and wildebeest and herds of elephants made their way there just as in ages past.

When the Kalkars first came to Earth, the larger animals were among the first casualties. Their home world was starving to death and cannibalism had been the only source of meat for a very long time. The large animals of Africa and the great cattle herds of the Americas were decimated. Many of the African animals were driven into extinction. Apparently Savjoda had rescued many from oblivion. How, I was not certain at the time. There would come a time when I would find out.

Fomas-67 was able to repair the flyer well enough for us to use it over short distances. It was indispensable for transporting lumber and for getting us to where game could be found.

Our life fell into a certain monotony and time was slipping away while I had no idea as to the fate of Tamla. We found that our differences made our life in this place somewhat uneasy. It turned out that Fomas-67 could not abide the odor of human beings and continued close quarters with me made him irritable. I, on the other hand, could not bear to watch him eat, a process that involved his everting his stomach through an opening in his torso and digesting his meal outside of his body.

Fomas-67 spent almost all of his time attempting to repair the flyer with the little resources we had while I applied myself to hunting. I constructed a bow and some arrows, as a sword was not the ideal implement for bringing down game.

The sky had darkened for the opening of a road several times since we had been marooned. Fomas-67 speculated that Savjoda no longer had any semblance of control of the equipment, for he had never used it that often before. I wondered in horror at the possibility of jomads swarming the skies of Earth. I mention this now because on one occasion that it happened, I had almost failed to make special note of it other than to curse the foul weather it

heralded. When I looked up into the blackness, however, I was startled to see the road opening up onto our island. The weird, halo-like opening in the air drifted down to the surface less than a mile from me. I could not see what, if anything, emerged from the road before the sun suddenly flashed back to life. I had been so transfixed by the sight of the road that I was caught by surprise and was temporarily blinded by the sun. I called at the top of my lungs for Fomas-67. With the swiftness that was characteristic of his species, he was at my side in less than a minute.

As my vision cleared I beheld an uncanny sight. In the distance was a small herd of very tiny antelope that stood no more than fifteen inches high at the shoulder, but that by itself faded into insignificance beside the fact that these antelope had equally diminutive human riders.

For as much as I could tell, Fomas-67 was not as thunderstruck as I to see this, although his expressions remained difficult for me to read. We had naught to do but stand fast as the miniature riders approached. They almost ignored me as they came to a stop in front of us, but the apparent leader of the band, who wore something resembling a rather normal Earth-style military uniform, walked directly up to Fomas-67 and addressed him in a rolling polysyllabic language with which I was unfamiliar.

The doyak was taking it all in. "What in Heaven s name is he saying?" I demanded.

Fomas-67 turned to me and said, "He said Lord doyak, we have found you and the prince from Earth at last. Zuanthrol greets you, but, sadly, also requires your help."

"And who, pray tell, is Zuanthrol ?"

"It is the name by which these people refer to Savjoda."

"Very well, and who are these tiny persons and where do they come from?"

As far as I could tell, Fomas-67 was now wearing an expression of surprise.

"They are Minunians, Julian. They are from your own home planet!"

Chapter Ten

Several Views

I

The Mastermind

Ras Thavas was as close to panic as his analytical mind would allow him to get. His flyer sped through the Barsoomian night as fast as he could go, for he knew that an army of jomads were close behind him. He had mere hours to reach Greater Helium to warn John Carter of the peril which stood unseen at his doorstep. It boggled even his great mind when he considered the immensity which was faced by the entire solar system.

In the distance, the jomads hurled insults and curses after him as they slowly closed the gap between them. The Mastermind of Mars was armed with nothing more than his wits, but wits such as those possessed by Ras Thavas were mightier than a thousand swords.

He turned the flyer upward after setting a rather complex program into the directional compass. That program would deliver him to Helium on a course which would describe a high arc through the upper atmosphere. In short order, the Mastermind lost consciousness, although he did so with a slightly smug smile on his face. The jomads, unused to the type of atmospheres behavior on the surface, did not expect to grow short of breath as they rose to follow and one by one, passed out and started to plummet toward the surface.

Later, the flyer was dipping down as it approached Helium when Ras Thavas regained awareness, none the worse for the experience save for a small headache.

II

Pellucidar

The sun was at zenith over Greenwich. Only had it been otherwise would that have been unusual, for Pellucidar never experienced night. Given that basic fact of Pellucidarian life, the panic that every person who was on the

streets at the time felt when the sun suddenly went out, was understandable. Luckily, or so it seemed, the darkness only lasted a few short seconds.

The sun came back to life as quickly as it had been extinguished. The population looked toward the sky in relief. That relief turned quickly to a new form of panic as a horde of winged creatures descended out of the renewed sunlight. At first, a few voices cried out "Mahars! They have returned to enslave us!" but the owners of those voices soon saw that it was a less familiar evil that they faced. The streets of Greenwich were soon crowded with jomads who actually, for the most part, ignored the fleeing residents. Only those who attempted to get in their way found themselves cut down by their strange ceramic swords. It took them only a short time to control the two key positions that they needed. The first was the underground rail entrance that was the gateway to Earth and the second was the Gridley wave transmission station so that they could delay new of their arrival from spreading too quickly.

III Crisis Management

The jemdar and the president both sat in the house of parliament that day and listened to one impassioned speech after another. A representative from the country of Brazil had the floor.

"Your Majesty, Mr. President. For two hundred days, our prince has been gone without any real explanation. The Barsoomian "Warlord" has continued to insist that a situation over which he has no control persists and that having heard from this "Ras Thavas" person, we should trust and have faith that all shall be resolved.

"I ask you, what manner of hogwash is this that we are asked to believe? Ras Thavas is nothing more than the court wizard to a man who rules a medieval system that is out of step with our modern world in almost every particular. This John Carter was born on this world but enjoys living a fantasy life on Mars! How much longer must we endure having to deal with this man? Furthermore, he has claimed that some unknown personage named "Savjoda" is the real villain in this shocking abduction without any evidence save for the word of Ras Thavas!"

The parliamentarian's tirade was interrupted by a messenger entering the chamber and running to the place where the president was seated. The president looked over the scrap of paper briefly and then stood up and struck the podium with his gavel.

"Gentlemen! I must call an end to this session at this time. There seems to be a disturbance at the underground station that requires my attention. A riot perhaps, but the military has been summoned and I must lend some guidance."

The president strode from the chamber with a sense of purpose in his step. Several ministers escorted the jemdar out, while the members of parliament fell into hushed discussions.

It was a rather shocking when the windows of the legislative chamber burst inward to admit a hundred sword wielding jomads. They drove the representatives from the chamber and herded them into a basement office where they were locked in. None resisted the strange winged creatures. The president was captured by jomads who constantly harranged him, but in a language he could not understand. Julian 67th, hereditary jemdar of Earth's hegemony, was arrested and confined to the residence of the palace. The center of Earth's government had fallen in a matter of minutes.

IV

The Walls of Greater Helium

It was near sunset. Cluros and Thuria hurtled overhead oblivious to the disaster that approached from the horizon.

Three men stood on the wall of Barsoom a capital city. Two were red men, one, a handsome youth in the spring of young manhood, another a withered veteran. Between them stood a square-jawed, gray-eyed Earthman. The youth was Ras Thavas the two thousand year old Mastermind of Mars in his seventh new body since he had mastered the art of brain transplantation. The Earthman was John Carter, Warlord of Mars, even older than Ras Thavas, but by how much, he knew not. The ancient one was Carthoris, son of John Carter and at the age of nine-hundred and ninety years had been contemplating retiring as jeddak of Helium.

"They are like a swarm of bees." Said John Carter.

"You have told me about bees, father, but I thought they were smaller." replied Carthoris.

"They are, son. These creatures, whatever they are, are far more dangerous."

Ras Thavas had only managed to stay ahead of the horde by about an hour. To his disappointment, most of them had regained consciousness before they had struck the ground and had renewed their advance on the city.

The ancient scientist addressed the warlord. "These creatures are based on my own work in creating the hormads and unfortunately, although their bodies are more symmetrical and they can reproduce themselves, their minds are just as simple. Savjoda created them as a work force to help him in his grand project of reclaiming the works of nature that had been weakened by humanity. He sought to make the almost dead world of Dhaimira into a preserve for wildlife that was barely holding on to its own existence.

"When the Kalkars invaded Earth seeking any meat they could find, Savjoda, like a later day Noah of Jasoomian legend, preserved them, each after their own kind. He hid them in Pellucidar out of sight or mind of the Kalkars. It was at that time that the doyaks, the one-time dominant race of Dhaimira, saw in Savjoda the key to their own salvation."

John Carter wrinkled his brow. "And now he has extended his wildlife preserve to the surface of Barsoom?"

"I don't think so, John Carter. The jomads, being the rather simple-minded creatures they are, have taken every idle word spoken by Savjoda as if it were the most urgent order. He once expressed concern about the continued rule of other human governments and they determined that he would conquer all of mankind. He expressed the loneliness of his mission and they contrived to kidnap a suitable bride for him. He expressed fatigue over the magnitude of his undertaking and they determined to take it over for him. At the moment, he is a prisoner in a gilded cage, waited on hand and foot, but unable to act on his own at all. I was able to contrive a way to escape and warn the outside world, but Savjoda insisted on staying behind in the hope he might be able to exercise at least some control."

"I only hope", said Carter, "that your warning was enough. We must arm every available man and use every available flyer. These jomads must not take Helium."

V

In the Sun's Embrace

Only twenty million miles from the Sun was the darkest place in the Solar System.

Kivu was the world within the planet Mercury. An age ago, on the day that the sun of Otala exploded, some visitors from that world had been in Kivu. They activated the machinery to open a road to their home world only to step out into vacuum and cold darkness. Kivu's life giving link with the Sun was left severed. Since that day, Kivu had been a world of darkness. Its natives took to burrowing into the ground to be warmed by the heat of the sun that seeped up through the ground. In time they became colorless and blind with a remarkably keen sense of smell. Over a thousand centuries, they had developed a tradition of epic verse and storytelling that was based only on the senses of smell, hearing and touch. Their oral literature had a rare beauty. The Kivians figure not at all in this story, however, because they never ventured out to the inner surface of Kivu at all. Because of this the jomads were unaware of their presence, in fact their existence was known only to a few doyak scientists.

The jomads were interested in using Kivu as a jomad home world and attempted to contrive a way to re-ignite its sun. Having only the most basic grasp on how the dimensional roads worked, they made a crucial error. Instead of placing the source for the inner world's sun near the Sun's surface, they placed it directly at the core of the Sun. The adjustment was made from Dhaimira, so it would be several minutes before the mistake became apparent. To the team of jomads actually within Kivu at the moment of ignition, there was so little delay in the result that they never had time to even understand that anything was amiss.

VII Borneo

In one of the last places on the surface of the Earth that was far enough away from city lights to be useful, stood a small observatory. External light, however, was not an issue today, for the astronomer was making solar observations. Through a dense smoked filter, an astronomer was observing and counting sunspots. The observatory was his refuge, particularly when the news of events on Earth was so disturbing. The jemdar and president under arrest and strange winged creatures running amok in the capital was bad enough news to drive him into the isolation of his cosmic observations.

As he viewed the solar disk, he found himself baffled by what appeared to be a second, smaller Sun bursting into existence beside it. His puzzlement turned to horror when he checked an ephemeris. The bright splotch was in the exact location of the planet Mercury.

The second asteroid belt that was born that day would come to be known as the "Jomad's Children".

Chapter Eleven

Meeting Savjoda

I was fascinated by the Minunians. They were amazing natural mathematicians and engineers. They were able to fix the flyer because they had good metal tools and because they could crawl inside the works.

The leader of the rescue team, Kanadotokiahago, saw to it that we were able to get into the air in a matter of hours.

It seemed like it was not too long before we were on our way again to Savjoda's headquarters. The entire contingent of seven Minunians and their mounts fit in the flyer quite comfortably with Fomas-67 and I.

The coast of the continent of Geprodna sharpened in clarity as we approached and the towers of a city built for beings who could fly came slowly into focus. Jomads flapped from high tower to rooftop doorways over a network of catwalks and bridges that served as streets. It was obvious that this city did not grow and evolve to meet the changing needs of a growing people. It was the vision of a single planner, constructed from the ground up as a whole concept. The industry, residences and transport network surrounded a core that was almost all gleaming metal, more metal than could be found in all of the rest of this world. Even from the air, the machine's astounding complexity was apparent. It looked like a system of gimbals, pivots and levers that controlled with minute precision the position of a gigantic lens-shaped mass of gold colored metal. I could just make out the hundreds of Minunian engineers whose job it was to constantly make whatever adjustments were needed.

Fomas-67 brought our flyer to rest atop a wide tower made of polished stone. The tower was directly adjacent to the machine itself. "This is Savjoda's city home." Said Fomas-67.

Kanadotokiahago said, "His only home at the moment. The jomads are protecting him. He cannot leave."

"Savjoda is being held under house arrest by his own servants?" I asked.

"He should explain that himself." said Kanadotokiamuskas.

Fomas-67 and Kanadotokiahago led me into a great hall that was dominated by an inlay map of all Dhaimira on the floor. The map greatly resembled the first map made by Tamla and I on the Keltrolna coast differing only in that this one was centered at this city. The walls were filled from floor to ceiling with books of all types and from all worlds written in every known language. The library of the jemdar's palace in San Francisco did not contain as many volumes or as varied a selection. In various places around the hall were some very black-skinned men who were hard at work filing away or referring to several of the books. They conversed softly in an obscure African tongue that Fomas-67 called *Waziri*. These gentlemen all wore very formal clothing and had the bearing of college professors.

There he stood upon the representation of the continent of Bavkerna. He was a man of my own race who looked to be in very fit middle age. His hair was brushed straight back and worn just short of shoulder length. His expression was serious and his attitude conveyed the image of great wisdom. The only other man who I had ever seen with this type of demeanor was John Carter himself. He wore a suit of very ordinary cut, but very rich fabric. The style seemed to be about a century out of date, but in no way did it have the look of a costume. This was how the man was used to dressing. Overall, he did not have the look of miscreant. He had a simple nobility that took me a little off guard.

"Your Highness", he said, "I only wish that it was more pleasant circumstances under which I were greeting you." He stepped forward and extended his hand.

I ignored the proffered hand. "Where is Tamla of Helium?" I asked.

"Sadly, I do not know. She escaped from her captors."

"You are her captor, you swine!"

For only an instant, anger clouded Savjoda's noble features, but with a deep breath, he restored himself to equanimity. Calmly he responded, "I understand how distressed you must feel, but despite appearances, I am only indirectly responsible for the tribulations that the princess has suffered.

"I admit that I am the author of a situation which is no longer under my control, and for that I beg the forgiveness of all concerned. It is my greatest regret that all concerned are a number that grows with each passing hour.

"Too much responsibility was placed in the hands of the jomads, I understand that now. They are too simple-minded, too literal. This is their city, I rule it, but it is more theirs than mine. I am more their God than their head of government."

"I'm not sure I understand." I was skeptical, but willing to let him have his say. Besides, I needed to learn as much as I could about Savjoda.

"Of course, how could you? The jomads decided that I should have my every wish. They have also taken an unwarranted concern for my safety." As the man spoke, he paced over the map crossing seas and islands. He moved with uncommon grace and assuredness. There was an economy in his gestures that reflected long practice. *Very long practice*. Savjoda had been around a long time.

"Are you telling me that you did not kidnap Tamla?"

"Yes. I say in earshot of the jomads that I experience loneliness, and they see to it that I have a suitable bride. I mention that the planet would be better off with me in charge, and they invade the surface. I say that Kivu has been in darkness too long and they destroy a world."

"What are you talking about?!?"

"Kivu, the world within the planet Mercury. Two hours ago, the jomads incinerated it by mishandling the dimensional doorway. Millions died in a sudden flash. The jomads have controlled the machine for creating the roads for many days now. They are on Barsoom, they are in Pellucidar and they are on Amtor, Vah-nah and Earth."

Mercury destroyed? There had been a living world within it? I was taken aback by the new information. To have a new world revealed on its death day it was strange and sad. All the human worlds menaced by the jomads?

"How did you come to gain and then lose control of that kind of power?"

"It took a long time and luck, both good and bad, played a role."

"I was born just over one thousand years ago on Earth of a family from a place called England. I was lucky enough to be born into the privileged class and unlucky enough to be orphaned from it at a very early age in a strange land."

"I was adopted and raised by a family of what you would consider beasts and I grew to manhood unaware of my own humanity. I had books but no human companionship. I could read and write before I could speak. As a result of that upbringing, I have much of the savage within me. Although I was highborn in what was then Earth's greatest empire, in my heart I was lord of something greater, and at the same time more intimate, the deep and wild jungle. Not until I had attained manhood was I acquainted with the niceties of civilization, and never did I become wholly comfortable with them."

Savjoda paced back and forth nervously gesticulating as he spoke.

"Although I was born with a name and a title, my adopted family called me 'white skin', in the doyak language it is rendered as Savjoda. For the greater part of my life, it has been the only name I have been known by."

"As I grew more experienced, I discovered that there was little to envy in my own race. We were a people who sought to dominate rather than cooperate with nature. In the fullness of time, which included love, loss, riches and the attainment of power, it became apparent that I was not aging as others of my kind do. I had heard of one other such man, John Carter the Earth-man who had become Warlord of Barsoom.

"When the Kalkars came, I discovered a new mission in my life, that of saving Earth's noblest creatures from their abattoirs.

"Their conquest of Earth was swift and complete, but my home was in a remote location. It was several months before I saw my first Kalkar. I fought them with every thing I had within me and calling upon every resource at my command, but it was a forgone conclusion that they must eventually win."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I started transporting animals into Pellucidar. I had obtained a machine which could drill a tunnel all the way into the inner world. With the help of that device and other like minded people, I was able to preserve some of Earth's grandest creatures."

The Kalkars, thankfully, never discovered the existence of Pellucidar. For most humans after the Kalkar conquest, it became little more than a myth. It was a hundred years after they were driven from power that Pellucidar was rediscovered, but, by then I was already in Dhaimira."

The Waziri scholars had abandoned their books to listen. Apparently, Savjoda did not relate this story frequently.

"I was piloting an airplane on the day the sun went out in Pellucidar for the first time. The road led me to the city of the doyaks in Dhaimira."

Savjoda gestured toward Fomas-67. "Their world was in trouble. The internal worlds don't hold together environmentally as well as the external ones. The numbers of the doyaks were thinning and resources were diminishing. They had developed an amazing science and industry in spite of the fact that they had little metal. Almost all that they had, had been obtained by trading with a race from the surface of Barsoom known as the Kaldanes. They saw that my work at saving what I could of my own world was actually working to some degree and they sought my help.

"It wasn't the first time. It was the doyaks who brought John Carter to Barsoom. They caused the peculiar accidents that brought Carson Napier to Amtor and Julian 5th to Vah-Nah. The doyaks are the master planners. They are the ones who knew what was needed where and at what time. Their methods have not always been painless. It was also the doyaks who indirectly caused the death of my human parents.

The man seemed to have lost awareness that there was even anybody listening to his tale.

"I needed help and they made available to me the notebooks of Ras Thavas as well as some addenda of their own. I took quite some time, but I finally was able to design and create the first jomads based on the Mastermind's homads but able to reproduce themselves and combining characteristics of Terrestrial and Martian life. They have served me with extraordinary devotion. They built this city and followed the instructions of the doyaks to the letter in order to construct this transport machine. My every random thought, they treat as holy writ.

"It is true that I said that the worlds of the Solar System would be better off if I were in charge. It is true that I have felt borne down with the loneliness of my life, but I did *not* instruct the jomads to abduct Tamla of Helium to become my wife although I do find he to be a feisty and engaging young woman. I did *not* instruct the jomads to invade other worlds."

Savjoda's voice took on an ironic tone. "The jomads, in their wisdom, have sought to free me of the burden of day to day decision making. They also decided that I would be safer if I did not leave my residence."

He indicated the Waziri scholars and Kanadotokiahago. "The Waziri and the Minunians, and of course, the doyaks have all been working on a way to free me without agitating the jomads too much. They are already out of control, if they were to think that I had abandoned them, any semblance of control would be lost."

I stood there close to despair. The man I thought was my enemy, the penitent author of the greatest menace mankind had ever faced, was also the only person who could help bring it to an end. We needed more help and we needed it very soon.

Looking Savjoda in the eye, it was easy to see that his desire to end this situation was desperate. This man who was once lord of the jungle, now lord of a world met my gaze evenly. I said, "I know who you are and who you were. There is no situation that you cannot make better. Only your loss of faith in yourself can prevent it. Savjoda, I *must* find and free Tamla of Helium. To do that, I require your cooperation."

All present nodded their heads in agreement save for Fomas-67 who performed a peculiar gesture which may or may not have meant the same thing.

Chapter Twelve

A Portable Princess

Tamla of Helium had made a home for herself in the dense tropical forest several miles outside of the city.

A large cup tree had been cut down to make a dome on the ground for comfortable living with a door that could be closed against most wild beasts. She labored long and hard to drag the fallen tree into the shelter of the forest so that it could not be spotted from the air.

She now owned the ceramic sword of her former jomad guard as well as his pistol. On the second day of freedom, she used the pistol to bring down a banth that had cornered her. She now wore a necklace of his teeth as her sole adornment. Tamla had become quite comfortable living in the wild and expected that she could do so indefinitely if she had to.

She was now a familiar sight to the smaller animals that lived in the forest and her sound and smell no longer alarmed them. She spent much of her time mastering the art of swimming, which was a much more valuable skill in Dhaimira than on her native Barsoom and also shadow fencing with the five foot jomad sword. In spite of her diminutive stature, she became remarkably adept with the weapon. It was actually quite a bit lighter than a steel sword of the same length would have been which meant that it had to be swung harder to make a proper cut. On the other hand, if she swung it with both hands, the tip would be moving at a fearsome rate when it found its target. She had discovered that she could fell small trees in one stroke this way.

From animal hide, she made a sheath for the great sword that strapped across her back at an angle so that its tip would not strike the ground and she could still withdraw it easily by reaching over her shoulder. The radium pistol still had its original belt and holster that she had taken from the wounded jomad.

She had no way to measure time, but it seemed to her that a month had past when she started seeing them. Little men. Barsoom had no myths or legends of fairies or pigmies, so Tamla had nothing to relate to what she thought she saw. One finally appeared before her mounted on some sort of creature that she had never seen. He was white skinned and dressed in a loose shirt and trousers not unlike the original clothing Julian had been wearing when they entered Dhaimira, so she assumed that he was from Earth. The little man addressed her in a language she did not understand as

he handed her a rolled up piece of paper. In heavily accented Barsoomian he said "Please read."

The paper was a note in Barsoomian, which read as follows;

My beloved princess,

If you are reading this, my fondest wish has come true and Gosmasokamankgo has found you. I am sure that his appearance must be startling to you, but I assure you that he is a soldier and a scientist who is intelligent, brave and loyal. He is a servant of Savjoda who is prisoner of his own jomads.

None of what has happened to you in his name is his doing and he is now working tirelessly to set right what wrongs have been done. To that end, we, that is Savjoda, myself and others, have formulated a plan. In order to bring you into the city unnoticed by the jomads, we have sent Gosmasokamankgo, who has a method of smuggling you in. Cooperate with him fully. You may trust him as you trust me.

-Robin Harold Julian 68th

The princess looked down at the tiny man who stood only as high as her knee. He smiled up at her and motioned her to enter her dome house. He followed with a peculiar looking device in hand.

The small machine was dominated by an array of disks made of differing materials. Gosmasokamankgo directed her to sit and then activated the machine. She was taken by an extreme sensation of disorientation. In a matter of seconds she fainted into a state of deep unconsciousness.

She awoke inside of a huge structure, not unlike her own house save for the fact that it was three times the size. Her perspective changed when Gosmasokamankgo entered. He now was considerably taller than she. She looked about the room and saw that her sword, her gun-belt, her sandals, even the loop of leather she had used to tie back her hip length tresses, were now sized for a giant and lay in a pile to one side. Gosmasokamankgo, through some science, had reduced her to the proportions of his own kind. He handed her clothing that was similar to his own, only with differences in style and cut that indicated it was intended to be worn by a woman. Finally he applied a pale colored makeup to her hands and face, for that was all the skin the Minunian clothing left exposed. She now could enter the city in an almost perfect disguise. Only close examination would reveal the Barsoomian nature of her features.

She rode behind Gosmasokamankgo on his now much larger mount into the city of Savjoda. They entered the city past several towering jomads shading themselves with their tails. They paid the pair little attention. Shortly thereafter they entered a tall, elongated dome shaped building. Inside were many thousands of the diminutive people. The building was a vast gallery with apartments attached to the walls within a confusing network of steps, ladders and elevators. People were everywhere going about hundreds of tasks, small and large. Gosmasokamankgo guided their mount from one end of the vast gallery to the other and tied up his mount beside several others.

He led Tamla into another building, this one with a normal, to her huge, sized door. In this building were several very brown-skinned men who were quite tall for normal sized humans. Gosmasokamankgo spoke to one of the brown men, who immediately led them into the grand map room.

There stood Savjoda. He could not have planned a more impressive first time for her to see him, for he was a towering giant. Gosmasokamankgo extended his hand in Savjoda's direction and said, "Zuanthrol."

Savjoda addressed her. "It means 'the giant'. That has always been the name the Minunians have used for me. I am Savjoda and I am honored to meet you, Tamla of Helium."

Tamla was taken aback. She had expected to meet with me and instead she was confronted with her (perceived) nemesis and she was reduced in size at the time. "Where is Julian?" she demanded.

"He will join us shortly. The Waziri scholars are giving him a tour of the research rooms. Gosmasokamankgo must now undo the change which he has made to your size."

Again, the Minunian used the device and again Tamla swooned. When she again awoke, I held her hand in mine. Beside me stood two of the Waziri, Gosmasokamankgo, Kanadotokiahago and Savjoda. The Minunian costume lay in shreds around her now normal-sized body.

"Julian! Are we prisoners of Savjoda?"

"We *and* Savjoda are prisoners of the jomads. The jomads, it seems, have defined for themselves how to best serve their master. Suffice it to say that all is not how we have perceived it to be."

Tamla appeared to be confused and skeptical, but she trusted me, so she nodded her head and sat up. With gratitude, she received back her fine Heliumite steel sword from me and strapped it on. I knew that Tamla would never feel naked so long as she had her steel near at hand.

There were now great plans to be made. The jomads were on the verge of total conquest of the human solar system and their supposed master was

unable to stop them. Savjoda had been consulting with Ras Thavas for years concerning how to keep the jomads under control.

Tamla, having learned the whole story, still didn't think too highly of Savjoda. Through his inability to control the jomads, he had allowed an entire planet to be destroyed and there were jomads everywhere now. She did, however, have a suggestion. "Perhaps we should tell this entire story to John Carter."

Chapter Thirteen

Escape on Dhaimira

In spite of the fact that the jomads had their own agenda, when Savjoda ordered a road to be opened, they obeyed.

Tamla, Savjoda and I stood atop the palace as the sun went dark. We were dazzled as it again jumped to its former light. It took another several minutes until we saw the flyer as a dot against the sky. That dot swelled in size rapidly.

Savjoda said, "Fomas-67 has the power off until he is less than a mile above the ground. If it were anyone else, I'd call it a foolish risk. There is truly no more skilled pilot than that doyak."

The flyer finally started to slow down and sank gently to the roof. Onboard were Ras Thavas and John Carter.

The Warlord looked concerned, although he was relieved to see that Tamla was alive and well. The mastermind appeared detached, as was his usual demeanor.

John Carter was somewhat impatient. With every step he took, and he took many for he was pacing nervously, his metal clattered cacophonously. "We must act as soon as humanly possible." He said, "We kept Helium from being taken for now, but Zodanga, Korad and Ptarth have fallen to the jomads and their region of control is expanding. The fact is", he said with a sour expression, "that the way of the sword is lost to most Barsoomians these days. We are no longer a militaristic culture."

"The life of the warrior is still in the heart of all Barsoomians!" exclaimed Tamla.

The warlord smiled lovingly at the girl who, to his mind, had inherited more of his own personality than any of his recent descendants.

Savjoda and I listened bemusedly to this very Barsoomian exchange. Brute force from either Earth's or Mars' largely de-militarized empires would be unlikely to do the job. The jomads were already spread too widely in the Solar System.

Two of the Waziri scholars were consulting with Gosmasokamankgo and Ras Thavas at the other side of the great library.

Gosmasokamankgo broke free of the huddle and walked over to Savjoda and John Carter. He spoke to Savjoda in his peculiar language. "They have an interesting thought." Said Savjoda.

Two flyers sat on the roof of the palace. There were a few jomads around, but they were only instructed to protect Savjoda and to not let him leave, but not to interfere with his other activities. If one of the flyers had Savjoda on board when it set off, the jomads would give chase, but they would not dare question him before hand.

Fomas-67 took the controls of one of the aircraft and Ras Thavas the other. Into the first craft came myself, Gosmasokamankgo and two Waziri named respectively Dallo M'Tumba and the other simply Joseph.

Gosmasokamankgo had with him the device he had used to alter Tamla's size although it was now incorporated into another machine that had a more Barsoomian look.

The second craft took aboard Tamla and John Carter while Savjoda waited beside it.

Our craft took off with only passing notice of the jomads. Fomas-67 took us up above the road-making device and quickly gestured toward Gosmasokamankgo. The Minunian lifted the peculiar mechanism into a position which allowed him to point a lens at the front of it at the immense machine. At the same time the huge device began to diminish rapidly in size and float up toward the flyer. With deft manipulation of the controls Gosmasokamankgo directed the movement of the machine until it was now only three feet high and rested on the floor of the flyer. To my bemusement, there was a multitude of minutely shrunken Minunians scrambling about in the diminished machine. Their size was only that of insects and they were in a state of panic.

Fomas-67 said, "We must make haste now! The effect on inanimate objects lasts for only a very short time!", and wasted no a second as he turned the flyer toward the open sea and pushed the airship to full speed.

Every jomad in the city flew toward the site that the machine once occupied to see what had happened and Savjoda used that moment of distraction to leap aboard the second flyer and direct Ras Thavas to take off.

Both flyers were left unmolested for only a few short moments before the jomads fully realized what had happened and gave chase.

In our own flyer, I was asking Gosmasokamankgo and Fomas-67 a thousand questions as quickly as I could formulate them. "How in Heaven's name did you do that!?!"

Gosmasokamankgo answered in his peculiar tongue which I had no understanding of whatsoever. Fomas-67 was somewhat more helpful. "Ras Thavas and I educated him as to the nature of the more exotic rays of the Barsoomian spectrum. He was able to use the Eighth Ray in conjunction with the size control apparatus to perform this feat."

The jomads were gaining ground on the craft which held Ras Thavas, Tamla, Savjoda and John Carter. Ras Thavas set the directional compass and stood up with John Carter and Tamla with swords drawn. Along side them was Savjoda with a knife in one hand and a pistol in the other.

Twenty jomads swooped down on their flyer and in seconds twelve of them were falling dead to the sea. The remaining eight stood on the deck of the flyer locked in desperate combat while another group of them gained steadily on our flyer.

Gosmasokamankgo pointed down toward the water and exclaimed something in his native tongue. On the surface of the ocean was a circle of light. At that moment Fomas-67 did something alarming, he pointed the nose of the flyer directly at the surface of the sea and started to accelerate. In the flyer behind, Ras Thavas broke free of the fray and did likewise with their craft. The last of the jomads on the second flyer were dispatched and the group who were pursuing us turned back in order to get to Savjoda. Out of the ring of light on the surface of the water floated a huge bubble just in time for both flyers to penetrate its side. It remained unbroken and instantly dropped again beneath the waves with both flyers safe within. We were below the surface of the ocean, but surrounded with enough air to breath comfortably for quite some time.

Gosmasokamankgo again made some remark in his native language and pointed at the road making device. It was now bigger than it was a minute ago and expanding. The reduced Minunians, however, were not. Apparently the effect lasted longer on living things than it did on mere objects. It was clear that the flyer would soon be overtaxed by the increasing mass of the mechanism.

We started to see the outline of a depression on the seafloor as we sank downward. The machine was now seven feet on a side and swelling at a remarkable speed. The flyer broke into two pieces just as we settled to the bottom, depositing all of us to the bottom of the bubble. Its surface was slimy and resilient, like wet, semi-liquid rubber.

Directly outside of the bubble were a band of darmayoks who motioned us to approach them. They were somehow forming a second bubble, like a bud from the surface of the one we were in and all of us scrambled toward it trying to out race the expansion of the machine. The last person into the bud was John Carter who's sword arm was soaked to the elbow in jomad blood. The bud pinched closed and broke free of the larger bubble and bounced along the sea floor, jostling us considerably, but causing no great harm. Although the transparency of the bubbles was limited, we could see that the machine had attained its full size once more. I can only guess how the, now ant-sized Minunian engineers reacted to see its great mass expand around them to a size much larger than they could have expected. According to Fomas-67, it would be several days before they regained their normal size if Gosmasokamankgo didn't intervene before then.

The trip from the palace had taken only a short time but we had gained both control of the machine and Savjoda's freedom.

Our bubble was carried by several darmayoks to a structure that looked rather like an enormous tree. The uppermost branches reached right to the surface.

"That", said Fomas-67, "is a darmayok city. We will be able to live and work here in relative comfort for a short time at least."

The bubble was attached to a branch and something resembling a mouth, or some sort of animal orifice in any case, opened into it. Fomas-67 waived us through it and we obediently went.

Inside was a wet tube that had a peculiar and unpleasant smell and looked more like it had been grown than built. I later discovered that this was in fact the case. The darmayok cities and buildings are structures created by specially bred creatures not unlike the corals of Earth. The bubble that transported us to the city was a creature rather similar to the coelenterates of my home world. Although they used neither metal nor fire, the darmayoks were far from unsophisticated.

A darmayok walked up the corridor toward us. It was the first time I had ever seen one of these creatures make its way on foot. Its feet splayed outward when it walked and it had a peculiar rolling motion to its stride. It spoke to Fomas-67 in its own language and the two conversed for a few

moments. Finally we were conducted to a room that was somewhat less wet and smelly.
There we sat to plan our next move.

Chapter Fourteen

The Tube

The darmayok city was designed for the comfort of inhabitants who lived in water and yet breathed air.

The city was like a great tree whose highest branches were snorkels that actually breached the surface of the Dhaimiran ocean. These tubes reached to the deepest depths where pressures were high. For the air to reach the bottom at breathable density, it had to be compressed by powerful pumps. Dhaimira had no metals to speak of, therefore the pumping apparatus had to be made in a fashion quite different from how it might be on Earth. The pumps were living organisms that hung from the branches of the city like huge, throbbing fruit. Their remote ancestors were a variety of fish that defended itself from its enemies by inflating its body to a huge size, thus alarming predators. The current form of the animal is wholly sessile, living its life permanently attached to the branching structure. Its sides slowly pulse in and out to supply atmosphere to the depths. This filled the city with a soft, wet, breathy beating. It was this sound that formed the background to every other sound in the city.

Savjoda sat at a table pondering over a cup of coffee that one of the Waziri had served him. It astounded me that this man had the presence of mind to bring along not only the coffee, but the rather elaborate apparatus needed for its preparation. I and John Carter had accepted a cup gratefully as had Tamla, but she took a single sip and put the cup aside with a disgusted expression. Fomas-67 was off somewhere with Ras Thavas and Gosmasokamankgo, the Minunian scientist.

"It has always been my single vice." Said Savjoda, as he savored the black liquid.

"Well and good", said I, "but perhaps we should think of something beside indulging our vices."

"Prince Julian", said John Carter, "much has transpired and perhaps we should take time to clear our minds for the battle which lies ahead."

It was at that point that Fomas-67 entered the room with Gosmasokamankgo and Ras Thavas at his side.

Savjoda looked up at the bizarre creature with weary expectation. "So, my old friend, what have you to say? What do we need to know to proceed further?"

The doyak spoke without preamble to Savjoda. "We have encouraged the development of the various worlds of the Solar system with 'catalyst persons', mostly from the planet Earth. If only all had worked out as well as John Carter did for Barsoom." He gestured toward John Carter in what might have been the doyak equivalent of a nod. "You were the person originally designated for Pellucidar. Our plans changed when Abner Perry and David Innes discovered that world on their own. You were left on your own until we needed you. The first Earth person designated for Amtor, a young woman named Betty Callwell, was a failure. She developed mental problems and forgot who she was. She was returned to Earth after being replaced by Carson Napier, but, unfortunately, she did not survive the trip.

"To Rasoom, we sent an American soldier named William Heller who was blinded in your second World War. He was sent into pitch-dark Kivu and became its hero and eventually, its ruler. Kivu was a world where the sense of sight did not exist, but there were two senses that didn't exist on Earth, Barsoom or Amtor. His ability to utilize these senses and his previous training as a swordsman led him to bring that world into a new age.

"We even experimented with the development of farther worlds. The human who came to be known as Tangor was brought to a world so far from our solar system that the light from its sun would take over 200,000 Barsoomian years to reach us.

"It was never planned for you to come into Dhaimira, or, for that matter, for Dhaimira to even be discovered by men for Earth or Barsoom for at least another thousand years.

"You forced us to change our plans when the Kalkars invaded Earth. We were impressed by your desire to preserve the animals of your home planet. Pellucidar was only temporarily useful for that purpose, so we took a great risk and made it possible for you to enter Dhaimira. We had ourselves preserved many of the creatures of ancient Barsoom and Vah-Nah in lands we no longer used ourselves. Our own population has been purposely kept small in modern times. The last time a doyak was born was over five hundred years ago. We need little space for ourselves.

"With that having been done, we sat back and watched. We allowed you to become familiar with the work of Ras Thavas and you created the yomanas, the sopars and the jomads."

Wait a minute." I said, "What are yomanas and sopars?"

Savjoda answered. "Sopars were an artificial race which were designed to protect me from the doyaks before I knew they meant me no harm. They combined features of lions and humans. The doyaks destroyed them. The yomanas are intelligent beings that are built on the same plan, more or less, as Earth's elephants. They live in Keltrolna. Their job was to clear land and manage herds that were brought from Earth."

There were a few moments of silence in which the city breathed steadily. "Be that as it may," continued Fomas-67, "We made a mistake in allowing you to make a home here. Dhaimira needed no catalyst person of its own and you could not help being one."

It was Tamla who spoke up this time. "He can't stay, can he?"

"No. He cannot. Nor can he return to Earth."

Savjoda looked thoughtful. "Fomas-67, you are an old friend, you may speak freely. What is to be my punishment?"

"You must undo, as much as possible, the damage you have done. You must leave Dhaimira and not return to any of the worlds in Terrestrial or Barsoomian influence."

"Or?"

"Or you shall be 'retired'."

Never has such an innocuous word sounded so ominous.

John Carter said, "You are saying that his usefulness to the doyak master plan is at an end. Surely you must recognize that he has a life outside of your uses for him!"

Savjoda spoke before Fomas-67 could reply. "No, John Carter. He is right. My whole life has felt the force of some sort of guidance. Wherever I have been, I have been master of my world but that world has also been master of me. It has always been clear that I am part of something greater. Surely you have also felt this, that even though you serve no master, you serve some cause that perhaps you cannot even name."

"I'm satisfied that you understand, Savjoda."

"Yes, I understand. My first job, which will require the assistance of all here, is to stop the jomads."

Ras Thavas said, "Gosmasokamankgo, who was kind enough to teach me his language, has collaborated with me on a few methodologies which might be of great aid in achieving that end. I trust that the 'road machine' will still work?"

"It will," Said Savjoda, "but its Minunian engineers must first be restored to their normal size to operate it."

Gosmasokamankgo said something in his polysyllabic language. Ras Thavas said, "My associate informs me that that has already been accomplished."

We worked on our plans for many hours. Occasionally a darmayok would appear with food, usually fish, always raw, but with wonderful sea herbs. It was remarkably similar to a way I enjoyed fish on my home world, right down to the seaweed wrapper.

There were only two flyers. It turned out that there were only three in all of Dhaimira and our party had two of them. They would be enough to get al of us through a road onto the surface of Barsoom. The Minunian engineers would stay behind, but in touch via Gridley wave, to run the great machine. It took a little time to make all preparations. At one point Tamla and I were sent to the top of one of the snorkel tubes to check for patrolling jomads. The way up the tube was a strange journey, to say the least. The interior of the darmayok city was lit with biological organisms who were naturally phosphorescent. This gave everything a peculiar greenish tint that made even my beautiful princess appear somewhat sickly.

The segment of the city that was one of the snorkels was a large open area under a cone-shaped roof. This court was some hundred and fifty yards across. A spiral ramp ran around the wall providing for a gentle ascent. As we made our way upward, we looked down upon hundreds of darmayoks going about various tasks, many of which we could not comprehend. One portion of the floor below was a garden of mushroom like plants from which, we learned, was made the mysterious water de-salting agent that the first darmayoks we had met gave us.

As we neared the apex of the cone, we perceived that it narrowed to a tube that ran to the surface of the ocean. The construction of this snorkel led to some rather interesting acoustics. When the aperture at the surface was opened, the wind blowing across it could make it behave like a huge, deep organ pipe. If all were opened, the entire city could sound a single, mighty chord. The darmayoks associated this sound with good omens.

The inside of the tube was about six feet wide with horn-like projections from the walls that served as a ladder. The tube itself was rather peculiar, with walls that seemed to be covered in moist flesh. The projections that were our footholds resembled teeth emerging from the gums of some great animal. There was a strong, but not overly objectionable odor that permeated the air in the tube. To me it smelt like crab shells and bird feathers. The sound from the organic pumps was greatest here in the tube. It made a constant roar that, while not overly loud, still seemed to have the ability to

mask out all other sound and made conversation between Tamla and myself nigh impossible.

We had to climb about two hundred feet before we reached the first valve. It was pink, fleshy and tightly puckered evoking only the most unpleasant of associations in my mind. I had been instructed in the method of opening it, which involved stroking a purple patch on the wall immediately below it. We passed through to have it instantly shut behind us, and saw another valve twenty feet above. In toto, we were required to pass through six valves before reaching the surface. The surface was, in fact, something of a surprise, for the opening simply looked like another of the valves we had passed through, except that this one admitted brilliant sunlight upon opening.

I looked out to find that the tube extended some ten feet above the water line. Both Tamla and I savored the fresh air of the surface. On the outside, the tube resembled weathered wood and hung with seaweed. WE could see no jomads, even with the aid of a powerful telescope lent us by Ras Thavas. If they did not know of this city and knew not of our presence here, then they must truly have been bewildered by our disappearance.

We left the telescope at the top of the tube along with a device to convey images from it remotely to a device constructed by Ras Thavas and Gosmasokamankgo. In that way we could know if any jomads ever approached the city.

Having accomplished this task, we returned to the depths of the sea, hopefully to carry out the final portion of the plan.

Chapter Fifteen

Morbus and the Roads

The new bubble contained both flyers as it ascended toward the ocean's surface.

Tamla, Savjoda, John Carter, and myself occupied the two flyers with Fomas-67 and Ras Thavas as the pilots. Gosmasokamankgo and the other Minunians stayed behind in the darmayok city to operate the machine. The bubble broke the surface and opened into a floating, rubbery pad upon which the two flyers rested.

We simultaneously lifted into the sky and Fomas-67 sent a wireless signal to Gosmasokamankgo back beneath the ocean.

We were plunged into darkness and then a new sun appeared in a patch of clear dark blue sky. The real Sun. We were looking into the sky of Barsoom. The flyers lifted quickly and made for the hole in reality at the center of the world.

Halfway to the opening, we saw a great mechanism flying through the sky. It was the "brother" apparatus to the great machine at the ocean's floor, the one which actually created the "road" through which we passed. It orbited Dhaimira's sun at a remarkable rate of speed. I was told by Fomas-67 that it actually housed a full time staff of doyak and Minunian engineers. I should very much have liked to have seen how those workers were replaced, for only the very fastest flyers would have been able to catch up with the speeding machine.

The air of Dhaimira didn't start to thin out until very near the sun. In fact, so near that had the sun been lit, no living being could approach closely enough to notice. I felt the air grow briefly thin and cold before it became suddenly denser, but not so dense as that of Dhaimira. I now breathed the air of Barsoom.

Cluros and Thuria hurtled overhead, quite visible if not as magnificent as they appeared at night. Ras Thavas directed us toward Morbus where his great laboratory complex was located.

The city of Morbus was very ancient dating back to the nigh-forgotten age when rolling oceans covered much of Mars. It now stood on an island in the middle of Lake Toonol. This region had once been a vast stinking swamp, but the addition of the new atmosphere plants had started a reversal of the planetary drying which had seized Barsoom ages ago. Today what was once a desolate swamp is now a large clear lake. In some remote future age, oceans would once more exist on this world. Lake Toonol was once the deepest part of the deepest ocean, so it still persisted as a marsh even into the driest age of Barsoom. Morbus was rebuilt once over fifteen hundred years ago by Ras Thavas and is where his original laboratory was located. Here he perfected his surgical wonders and it was here that he engendered the first artificial humans, the so-called "hormads". The hormads proved to be a great deal of trouble and for a time, the master became the slave. Ras Thavas could well empathize with Savjoda. That second city of Morbus was bombed out of existence by the fleet of Helium and Ras Thavas set out to rebuild it yet again. While the city had suffered other mishaps since that time, none had completely leveled the city again. The Morbus of today is clearly assembled on the skeleton of that third city and is now home to a

great scientific university. Ras Thavas is jeddak of Morbus, but plays little role in the government. That work is left to the "jeds of administration" the head of which is Zorn Konark, the first jed. On Earth, we would call him a mayor.

It was Zorn Konark who stood awaiting us as the flyers landed in the center of the city. Ras Thavas was instantly giving a hundred different orders to the throng that had gathered around. He called for every available flyer assigning the fastest one to John Carter to convey him back to Helium that he might take similar action there.

Many in the crowd stared dumbstruck at Fomas-67, for they had never seen a creature of his type. One man, mistaking him for a dangerous animal, attempted to capture him and swiftly discovered the amazing strength of his tentacles.

Before too long Tamla, Savjoda and I had a flyer of our own and a peculiar gun which had been designed by Gosmasokamankgo and mass produced through some amazingly swift method in the city of Morbus. Within hours, several flyer loads were on their way to Helium.

Two days passed before the fleets met on the dead sea bottom halfway between Helium and Lake Toonol where a small camp had been assembled to support the Gridley wave device needed to communicate with Dhaimira. John Carter, who now commanded a fleet of over six hundred flyers, had Ras Thavas contact Gosmasokamankgo in the darmayok city. The device required that the Mastermind wear tight fitting headphones to receive the communication, so no others could hear what he heard, but the expression on his face clearly revealed that he was unhappy with the news he was hearing.

Looking up at John Carter and Savjoda he said, "The darmayok city is under attack by jomads. They have discovered that it is where the machine is now located and they seek to retrieve it. They have blocked all of the city's snorkels save for one which they are trying to make their way down."

I asked Savjoda, "How long can the darmayoks hold them off?"

"Not long. The darmayoks are poor fighters. We must work quickly or all may be lost."

* * * * *

At that moment, the darmayok city was under siege although there were only a very few ways the jomads could get in. All but one of the organic snorkels were blocked with huge stacks of boulders which had

been laboriously flown from land. It certainly did look bad until a sudden illumination leapt up from the depths.

As each of the winged creatures was touched by the light they seemed to dwindle in size. The device of Gosmasokamankgo had been brought into play. Each of the jomads was soon no larger than a doll and as their bodies shrunk, so did the capacity of their brains, for the hormad brains of the jomads did not respond to the Minunian diminution apparatus in the same way as that of a human. By the time they had reached their final size, they were no more intelligent than the small birds they resembled.

* * * * *

The sky opened up over the dead sea bottom and the first group of flyers rose into the strange rippling hole in reality. Our destination was Pellucidar and then Earth. The hole closed and then reopened, this time exposing the gray terrain of Vah-Nah and a second group of flyers entered the spatial rift.

Although I was not there to see it, the last and most complicated step was the team sent to Amtor. Amtor was not a hollow world like Earth, The Moon or Mars. The central sun of Amtor only got as hot as molten iron, creating sort of a "foamy" underworld of caverns and tunnels below the surface of Amtor which was inhabited by all sorts of strange creatures. The journey to the surface of that world would be arduous, requiring digging machines similar to that which first entered Pellucidar from Earth. John Carter referred to that region of Amtor as "Hades" when Ras Thavas told him about it, a reference that the Mastermind simply did not understand.

* * * * *

The most dramatic battle was fought in Pellucidar. The second the sun blinked out, the jomads knew what was happening. They assembled in a great flock in the sky over Greenwich many thousands strong. They must have, at least at first, been heartened when they saw how few the number of flyers was that had come through. They would have been well able to deal with only the hundred or so, particularly with their new metal weapons. How quick they had been to take advantage of the great mineral wealth of Pellucidar! Each of them now carried a large shiny steel sword and a Barsoomian style long-range Radium pistol. It must have been crystal clear to them how they would soon overwhelm us.

I was close enough to see the shocked expression on the faces of some as they watched their weapons expand in their hands, as they suddenly found

themselves lost in the folds of their own clothing. It was only a matter of hours before every jomad of the legions around Greenwich were dealt with.

A group passed through to the surface of Earth and similarly handled the city of San Francisco. Much to my relief, my father was discovered alive, if dirty and underfed, in a palace basement room. The president had been killed by accident while the jomads were attempting to win his cooperation.

My reunion with my father, the jemdar, filled me with the greatest relief that I had ever felt. Greater than the fate of worlds is the bond between a son and his father.

In a matter of a few weeks, all of the major concentrations of jomads in the solar system were engaged and eradicated, but occasional small tribes of them were encountered on various worlds for another twenty years.

Finally, I was able to take Tamla of Helium as my bride. Ours was a life of great contentment with occasional bouts of restlessness. We traveled the solar system via the roads through space. Tamla presented me with two strong sons full of vigor and inheritors of their mother's feisty spirit.

Savjoda returned to his capital in Dhaimira to await his punishment by the doyaks.

Chapter Sixteen

Punishment

Savjoda stood in a large hall in the hive-like city of the doyaks. All was quiet save for the muffled calls of the vagas and horn-dogs from outside.

Several doyaks, including Fomas-67 had gathered this day for the purpose of passing judgement on this man. Also there were several persons from Earth and Barsoom Including John Carter and myself. By that time, I had ascended to the throne as jemdar of Earth. My time reunited with my beloved father had been all too short before old age had taken from me what the jomads had not been able to.

"Savjoda", said one of the doyaks, a certain Gotan-14, Director of the city, "you are aware that you can no longer be welcome on any of the established worlds. It would be easy to simply have you executed and be done with it and, at first, the majority of us felt that that would be the best course of action."

I was slightly surprised to find myself breathing a sigh of relief for this man who had caused, if inadvertently, so much chaos. I had learned respect for him and even, in a way, come to like him personally.

Gotan-14 gestured to Fomas-67 who drew back a divider revealing a device of peculiar construction. With a tentacle he touched a small lever and a beam of light illuminated a small screen. An image appeared that was at first difficult to decipher. It resembled a view of Earth from high orbit, but it just went on and on. I could see the scale of the view from the weather patterns and it was huge. I counted twenty continents the size of Africa or Asia and could find no horizon at all.

"What is that?" Asked Savjoda.

Gotan-14 responded, "That is a view of a small portion of Thorandalo, the world within Eurobus. It has always been thought by its inhabitants that the planet's huge gravity was countered by its immense rotational speed, but that is incorrect. The thinness of the planetary shell is such that the gravity is only slightly higher than that of Earth in any given location even though the total mass of the planet is far greater than several hundred Earths.

"This world boasts incredible variety. The distances are so great that life evolved separately in several remote locations and the products of those separate evolutions have only come into fleeting contact recently. There are a million unknowns in Thorandalo and someone must come into this world to explore and develop it. There are several forms of civilized and semi-civilized creatures in this world, many of them hostile beyond imagining. Although the surface world of Eurobus is remarkably geologically active and the oceans so storm ridden that travel upon them is impossible, Thorandalo is much less troubled by these factors. The oceans are, by comparison, peaceful and save for a few regions, volcanoes and earthquakes are rare."

John Carter had a wistful expression in his gray eyes. He could see what lie ahead. Savjoda was to be transported to this unknown and dangerous world. While a rational man might feel otherwise, I could see that his heart was consumed with envy.

Savjoda spoke. "So this is to be my prison?"

"Your home." Said Gotan-14.

Savjoda said, "I accept the judgement of the doyak lords of Dhaimira." His expression was unreadable.

Gotan-14 gestured in a manner that must have been the doyak equivalent of a head nod. He continued to speak. "This world is huge and much of it is unknown. We can offer to send more than one person if one should choose to go there of his own volition."

John Carter was instantly attentive. His expression told all. Could Gotan-14 mean what he thought he had meant?

* * * * *

A flyer lifted from the palace at Greater Helium. It had a pilot and a single passenger. The passenger was the exiled Savjoda who looked toward his future with mixed feelings. Everything he had ever known in his long life was to be left behind forever, but ahead was perhaps something just as interesting.

The pilot was John Carter, the Warlord of Barsoom. He had said that he wished to explore the new world for a few months and the doyaks had granted his wish. He had turned the government over to his son, Carthoris who immediately called for the election of a real parliament and a Prime Minister after the style of Earth. He had not actually said as much, but John Carter was not expected to return. Without the warfare, without the adventure and most of all, without his incomparable princess, Barsoom had little left for him. His "retirement" was as permanent as that of Savjoda.

The sky opened over the flyer revealing a new world, a thousand new lands. The airship flew through the opening without hesitation and without either of its occupants giving a backward glance.

Afterword

Well, this has been interesting.

Needless to say, as the astute reader might have figured out, I have taken a liberty or two. The big one was giving Vah-Nah a sun, which it didn't have in "The Moon Maid". Originally that world was supposed to be lit and warmed by light entering through randomly placed holes in the crust and some internal phosphorescence. I had to give it a sun to make the internal logic of my story work. Vah-Nah simply couldn't have been warm enough from sunlight shining through randomly placed "hoos" and the physics of my solar system required some consistency. I have, as a result of writing this story, contemplated writing another which would be titled "Einstein at the Earth's Core".

The personalities of both John Carter and "Savjoda" have changed and mellowed with the passing of ten centuries. Ras Thavas remains the same, caught up in his enthusiasms and beyond good or evil.

The teller of the tale, Julian 68th, is not a heroic type. Although descended from heroes, he is more of a sheltered aristocrat. He is not without his own brand of resourcefulness, but, unlike Savjoda or John Carter, is aware of his limitations. He wants adventure, but is pragmatic about how much adventure he thinks he can deal with. In my need to shorten this project, I'm afraid that I never allowed Julian to find his own real voice in this story. He ended up reading like more of a cardboard cut out than any other character.

Tamla of Helium knows in her own mind that she is supposed to be a warrior, but is mostly thwarted in that regard. If she has inherited John Carter's longevity, she will, no doubt, end up in Thorandalo seeking adventure.

I feel bad about Kivu. I needed something spectacular for the jomads to upset, but I

couldn't bring myself to cause major harm to any of Burroughs' original worlds. Someday, I may go back and write the story of William Heller of Kivu, knowing full well of its eventual end.

I wanted to deal with the idea of what does an immortal hero do when there is no more heroing to be done. In this case, I stated the issue and then dodged it by sending my heroes to a latter day Valhalla, Thorandalo.

I expect some criticism for this work. In some ways it has violated much of the central premise of ERB's work, that the adventure goes on forever. His worlds did change over time, become better known, better explored, but somehow it was implied that the adventure would always be there, that there was no shortage of evil queens and lost races, but, of course in a real world there eventually has to be. I was hoping to inject some of that sense of finitude into ERB's world and still make it work.

I ended up having to rush this project or be in danger of being unable to finish it at all. If it seems like there is a lot squeezed into the later chapters, that is the reason why. I had planned this as a 50,000 word novel and instead ended up with a 30,000 word novella. Perhaps someday when I have time on my hands I may flesh it out, but lets not hold our breaths.

To anyone who bothered to read this far, you have my thanks for your patience.

Seth Kallen Deitch

3/14/99 Cambridge

*A good number of my early stories center around something called The Institute for Parallel Studies. My first two novels, **Bromfkidor** and **Beneath Bromfkidor** are the earliest and longest of these although there was a short run self-published magazine called The Journal of the Institute for Parallel studies that had some short vignettes that belong to the cycle. The story that follows is the central tale of the mythos and the last one written. I'm not saying that I will never revisit the Institute, but thanks to this story, I can at least think of it as complete. Anything after this is gravy.*

The Institute

*"Ins and Outs of the "Great Inversion"
Fredric Martin Ajers, Ph.D.*

The day that I am writing these words is an important anniversary. It is the centennial of the "Great Inversion" of 1896.

Discussion of this event should begin with the observations of the actual event and the so called "event nodes" which are believed to be associated with it. The principal event took place on May 7th 1896. Known associated "nodes" are on February 3rd 1722, December 21st 1865, June 30th 1908, June 28th 1914, November 22nd 1963 and April 12th 1972

In Boston, the morning of May 7th 1896 was the first perfect spring day of the year. The sound of the birds singing was clearly heard even in the busy streets where automobiles were still a rarity. Street vendors hawked their wares. The Public Garden was decorated by the presence of fine ladies promenading with their parasols and rambunctious children rolled hoops through the alleys. No one really noticed that there was something not quite right about the clouds that started to gather starting around 10:00 am.

At that time, banker Arthur S. Cabot took a moment to look out his office window. "Like a whirl pool of spotless blue." He recorded in his diary, " Like a portion of the sky itself had been stirred."

In the Common, Mrs. Winston Shaw was "suddenly taken" by visions of "fanciful creatures". For several days thereafter she would be subject to episodes of swooning without notice.

Across the river in Cambridge, a demonstration in magnetism in a Harvard Physics laboratory yielded very unexpected results when the powerful electromagnet started attracting water.

In the Jeweler's building two blocks from the common, Solomon Pinsky, a diamond dealer was driven to near madness when every gemstone in his shop started emitting a piercing tone. He claimed that after that day he could never separate English from Yiddish and for the rest of his life spoke a peculiar patois of the two.

On the waterfront, a group of twenty longshoremen claimed to have seen a vision of the Blessed Virgin although, strangely, they all said afterward that it might only have been a packing crate.

A Beacon Hill houseboy, known to history only as "Elisha", said, "The sky took to spinnin' like a big ol' pinwheel. My teeth hurt and I thought it was the hour of the Lord"

Every dog in town started barking and would not be silenced.

Mary Margaret O'Leary, a housemaid, noticed the water in her mop bucket swirling as if it were draining away, but not diminishing in volume in any way.

Master Howard Lambert, ten years old, discovered a sudden fluency in the Armenian language only to forget it all within a week. He had had no previous education in that tongue.

A farmer in Braintree claimed later that his cows had quoted scripture at that hour.

A Methodist clergyman apparently vaporized while conversing with a friend who in a short time had seemingly forgotten that the other man had ever existed in spite of some twenty-five years acquaintance. According to police records, he became more and more indecisive about the man's name as their interview proceeded.

As unexpectedly as it had begun, the peculiar effects ended. Over the next few hours an increasing number of people forgot that anything out of the ordinary had taken place. At the end of one month only five percent of people interviewed could remember the extraordinary events of that morning. In spite of the

fact that this event was world wide, we depend on a very sparse sampling of observations for information concerning it.

Boston is one of only four places from which we have more than individual reports.

It wasn't until twenty years had passed that science had even started to develop the means to evaluate the events of that day. Alexander Rodman Mollot, working at the Dilmount Institute in Mulweeno had, through relentless research, discovered the effects of parallel fields. He had been a student at Harvard at the time of the mystery event and had taken detailed notes as it had transpired. Strangely, he had no memory of making the observations. The notes led him into a line of study, which culminated in the creation of a device, which duplicated on a smaller scale the effects of that morning in 1896.

The so-called "Parallel Resonant Field Translator" was able to create a small region of indeterminate time and gravity. Objects placed near the functioning machine could vanish or change in form.

Certain persons claimed to have experienced psychic episodes using the apparatus.

Eventually, Mollot would discover and report that all of these effects were due to the device's ability to open a connection between the intrinsic fabric of our universe and that of others like it. That a man of science would make such a claim was denounced as everything from merely irresponsible to outright blasphemy, but further demonstrations before educated audiences convinced academics and ultimately, the masses.

The ability to control the effect of gravity was the most obviously practical use of the new mechanism although there was no way to isolate that particular quality. In spite of this, the device made a fortune for its inventor because of its usefulness in controlling the buoyancy of lighter-than-air craft. For a time, there was hardly an airship in the sky, which wasn't considered "haunted".

It was Mollot who coined the term "Great Inversion" and identified the event as an incident of our universe briefly touching another. Interviews with persons from areas strongly effected by the event found that a significant sampling of them recalled different historical events from their neighbors. The habit of these people had been to keep their own council regarding their memories lest they be thought insane. Mollot had started to identify particular worlds outside of our own and was able to determine exactly what other world ours had contacted. Such a world is referred to as a "xenocontinuum" and it was the one labeled X7-C, which touched our world that day. The persons who remember the history of that world rather than our own were able to help Mollot create the first reconstructed picture of another world.

*There are several so-called "nodes" of the Great Inversion spaced at various points in time where peculiarities of various sorts have occurred. These nodes are thought to correspond to major possible turning points of history. They can be hard to spot for us because of the fact that they mark the point of something important **failing** to happen. Mollot predicted the June 28th, 1914 node as being of particular importance, but when the date came, all that was detected was a waver in the parallel field followed by a marked "divergence" effect from xenocontinuum X12-B. No doubt the node was centered in that continuum. The June 30th, 1908 node might have been created artificially. It appears to be associated with a major malfunction of a parallel field device being used to drive an experimental skyship.*

Without the proof provided by the Great Inversion, the science of parallel fields could never have developed. The meaning of the effects of the parallel field would remain only partially understood

-Introduction to "The Layman's Book of Parallel Fields" 1997, Arbor House

I

The Xenolite

Fred Ajers was just starting his morning coffee and donut when the phone on his desk rang. He was in mid donut-dunk.

Bob Zalinsky in lab seven was on the other end.

"Bob! What can I do for you this morning?"

Zalinsky's voice was filled with bemusement. "You should come down here. We have something ...extraordinary."

Fred's donut chose that moment to experience structural failure from oversaturation with coffee. An inch long chunk of it fell into the cup, splashing his shirt and tie. "Damnation!"

"As a scientist, I thought you would have a more positive view of the unique!"

"What? No. I had a little accident here."

"Coffee and donuts, right?" Fred was famous at the Institute for his collection of coffee stained shirts.

"Uh-huh." He blotted at his shirt. "I'll be down in a few minutes."

Donald, the janitor, was using the hallway for batting practice using a mop-handle and a wad of duct tape. This sort of behavior was tolerated from him. Donald was a strange fellow. He was a human xenolite. About fifteen years before, he had been snatched from his native world, where he had been a professional ball player. He had not been terribly sharp-witted to begin with and his transposition further befuddled his mind. He rarely spoke, but when he did, his conversations would be filled with strange slang, crude sexual references and baseball metaphors used without regard to their appropriateness. No one could understand what he was talking about most of the time. His time was largely spent mopping up his own tobacco spittle.

Donald was paying little attention to the follow-through from his swing. As Fred tried to sneak by, he had to duck fast as the swinging mop-handle whooshed over his head. He beat it for the elevator before his luck ran out.

When he arrived in the lab, Fred didn't even notice the object until Bob pointed it out to him on a lab table.

"We acquired this around eleven last night."

The object had indistinct edges as if it were spinning rapidly, but it wasn't, it was just sitting there. It looked like it *might* be a five-sided prism in shape, although it didn't present the same appearance from all angles. Fred wanted to squint when he looked at it because of the apparent blur. The color of the object seemed to be a neutral tan or putty gray. Zalinsky informed him that the spectrum reflected by the object had strange qualities.

"There are chemical patterns on the surface that appear to be a design of some sort, but they don't show as a different color as the rest of the object. It is possible that these patterns are intended to reflect a wavelength that is not in the normal spectrum."

"Where exactly *is* the surface?"

"Right, you noticed the indeterminacy of location. That's why it looks like it's vibrating."

"Is this thing four-dimensional?" He thought he might get a headache from looking at it.

"We think it has *seven* spatial dimensions. Of course, you can only see the portion that protrudes into three-space, which accounts for its odd appearance. It also seems to have some unusual behavior with time and causality."

Fred bent to examine the object more closely. He found that it was easier to look at it with one eye closed than with both, which brought out just how *wrong* it looked. "It certainly *does* have an odd appearance."

"Pick it up," said Bob.

The object had a bit of heft, but its mass varied depending on the angle at which it was held. The sensation was a bit like holding a gyroscope. It didn't feel like it was vibrating. The surface had a variety of textures. Parts of it seemed sticky.

"Where did you get this thing? I assume it's a xenolite."

"You assume correctly. We have been doing the final tuning tests for the new high load PRFT system and we set up some new molot cells, a battery of five with a rating of twelve kilohartleys each with an SGQ of 61° Kilmer. It ran so well on the first test that we decided to attempt a probe."

Fred Ajers knew that they should not have been running probes, but he kept his mouth shut for the time being.

Zalinsky continued. "We fed the PRFT some power and applied it to the cells and eased out the OEC to pull a focus as distant as the machine would allow." His expression had been animated, but now it became more serious. "A bleeder pin melted and before we could shut down, two more went and a cell exploded. 'BLOOP!' There it was on the transfer stage just as you see it there."

"'Bloop', huh?" Fred still was turning the object over in his hand watching its faces diminish and multiply as he did. "Where is it from?"

"X-162¹⁰³-{14-C} Σ-5 or thereabouts. We've designated it xenolite number X-009603-1."

Fred whistled softly. It was the greatest distance a stable xenolite had ever recovered from by about three orders of magnitude.

Work in the field had been going on for a several decades beforehand. Alexander Rodman Molot founded the Institute for Parallel Studies in 1906 following the discovery of parallel fields. The property of these fields to open previously unseen worlds was revealed when a standard St. Edmundsburch pencil was exposed to the then little understood energy field of a primitive PRFT system. It was not until some hours later that the researcher noticed that the name on the pencil now read "Ticonderoga". No

one was able to link the name of that upstate New York fort and town on Lake George with pencil manufacture in any way. After more of the mysterious artifacts emerged, many of them books and newspapers, researchers started to suspect that they were the products of completely different worlds, parallel universes. The early researchers labeled these worlds “xenocontinua”. The model of the universe used to explain these phenomenon states that since the dawn of time, the universe has been dividing like a bacterium within a larger, multi dimensional continuum. The xenocontinua that are reachable by low power probes are very much like our own although variant in historical details. Theory has it that they have separated from our own world in recent historical times. The world from which the new object derived must have split so long ago that the most basic natural laws had not yet come into being.

Fred was going to have to explain the new xenolite to the board in a way they could understand. This would be a challenge, as he didn’t understand it himself.

He spent most of the morning typing several pages filled with adjectives like “uncanny”, “bizarre” and “contra-intuitive”.

He was interrupted by the phone.

“Hello?” he inquired.

“Doctor Ajers? My name is Frank Johnston. I’m a reporter for the Sun-Herald. Do you have time to answer a few questions?”

“Ajers.” said Fred.

“Beg pardon?”

“My name is pronounced ‘Ajers’. It rhymes with ‘prayers’, not ‘badgers’.”

“I beg your pardon, Doctor Ajers.” This time he pronounced the name with great care. He changed the subject. “I have heard that something extraordinary has happened in one of your labs. Is there any foundation to that rumor?”

How on earth had he heard about that already? “You will have to be more specific, Mister Johnson. Extraordinary things happen here all the time.”

“Doctor Ajers, there are postings on several physics newsboards.”

“Really? Can you hold for just a moment?” Fred flipped on his memex and called up several boards one after another. One header read “Institute for Parallel Studies discovers four-dimensional object”, another read “What is the ‘Bloop’?” also “Strangest yet from the Institute labs!” A few sample lines from the articles revealed that fairly complete information had been drawn from. Fred wanted to know who had made the postings. He also wanted to know what a *reporter* doing with Internet access.

The Internet was designed for academics, scientists and military researchers to share information with colleagues without undue publicity. There was not supposed to be access for the general public and certainly not the press! Ajers assumed that Johnson was owed a favor by someone in the research community. Fred could barely imagine the sort of chaos that would result from the general population using the Internet.

He took the reporter off hold. "Mister Johnson, at the moment, I am inclined to suspect that those postings are some sort of prank. Of course news of interesting discoveries, if any, will be included in the weekly press release."

Fred knew he had not convinced the newspaperman, but he had successfully managed to put off further conversation on the subject until he had "looked into it".

The instant after he got off with Johnson, Fred picked the phone back up and rang Bob Zalinsky. He was still in his lab. Ajers was pretty sure that Zalinsky never slept and only rarely went home. Fred didn't know if there was a Mrs. Zalinsky, but if so, she was a very lonely woman.

Fred didn't waste any time getting to the point. "Every thing you post to message boards must be cleared by this office in the future."

"What happened?"

"Speculation, very accurate speculation, about your object is all over the Internet. I just got off the phone with a newspaper reporter who had seen them."

"Uh-oh!"

"I could not have said it better."

"How did a reporter get access to the Internet? Is that even legal?"

"I have no idea. I'll be in contact with the lawyers later. The main point is that we deal in information. We are a private research organization and our research is our product. It is how we support ourselves and, incidentally, pay your salary."

"Are you *threatening* me?" Bob was getting hot under the collar.

"Calm down. Unplanned publicity is threatening *us*. I don't even care if you continue probing on your own, but I need to know about anything significant *before* it appears on a message board."

Fred left it at that, but he suspected that there might be hell to pay in the near future.

II

Information Management

The Institute for Parallel Studies didn't always have a manager of public relations. At the time the Institute was founded in first decade of the twentieth century, they were dedicated to pure research as a department of the Dilmount Institute in Mulweeno. Shortly after the Bromfkidor Wars, the principal researchers sought to create a department at Harvard and moved their base of research there. They had made their reputation on the use and refinement of parallel resonant field translators, usually called PRFT's or "resonators" in the common jargon. At first, these devices found the greatest use due to their gravitational effects allowing skyships to carry greater loads and be more maneuverable.

The first xenolites changed all that. Trying to explain to the world what they were was a challenge. "Artifacts from other universes", "Information from another dimension" and "Products of sidewise archaeology" were all used to describe these objects. They were an interesting and, in the popular imagination, fun aspect of the research that maintained public interest in the work, but some of them contained very valuable information, not only valuable in a scientific sense but in dollars and cents as well. Very comprehensive histories of some of the nearer xenocontinua are available, but others have been purposely restricted to the academic community and the military. Three systems of xenocontinua in particular are very closely guarded. The X12-B system contains worlds in which two great wars, one of them involving most of the globe, dominated the first half of the twentieth century. In these worlds, people have developed weapons based on atomic energy. In the X9-H system, the code of life was unraveled and devastating weapons were created from bacteria, viruses and modified animals. A major war had left the entire continent of South America virtually empty there. In the X-24 worlds, there have been great conflicts fought with strange rays that cause madness and murder among the populations they are used upon. If information from these worlds were to get to the wrong persons, the results could be literally Earth shattering.

This was how the public relations department became necessary. It was incumbent on Fred Ajers to make sure that any questionable information from xenocontinua was controlled. He wasn't sure about the new object and what it represented, so any information in the hands of the general public was a serious breach of security.

Even the dangerous worlds had produced strange and wonderful things. Bob Zalinsky was well known as a lover of the perplexing complexities of the pseudo science of “pindalometry” native to the X-24 series of worlds, while Fred was a great fan of a popular musical idiom from the X-12 series known as “rock ‘n’ roll”. Everyone at the Institute had a favorite xenocontinuum and made as much of a study of it as possible.

Fred needed to walk. It was now around ten in the morning. There was time for more coffee and perhaps the newspaper. He exited the Institute Lab Building, which stood at 998 Massachusetts Avenue for the small market across the street where he purchased a Boston Sun-Herald for twenty cents, It was a dime less than the New York Times *and* it had funny pages. Taking his time, he headed for Harvard Do-Nut in Central Square.

He grabbed a booth so he could spread the paper out and ordered a bear-claw and a cup of coffee. Wednesday, May 17th 2000, read the date and the headline below “Germans to vote on East Prussian independence”. Germany had shed most of their foreign territories outside of Europe and now some of the European ones were starting to be cut loose. East Prussia wished to become the Republic of Warmia. The independence measure was expected to pass. The Germans seemed happy enough to lose a troublesome Yiddish-speaking minority.

Another header was “Patagona to extend franchise to non-Bromfkidorans”. The White and Indian majority of that land had been denied participation in their government in favor of the Bromfkidoran minority for almost eighty years. Now having to deal with an influx of refugees from the former Bromfkidoran “Survivalist” republics, the Patagonans needed a stronger native voice to prevent unchecked immigration. The environmental crisis in Bromfkidor was now out of control. The climate of that land would be wholly arctic within ten years. The number of displaced persons would rise to seventeen million before the end of the year. Few countries were willing to absorb large numbers of Bromfkidorans. For them, the situation was grim.

The presidential race was starting to take off. Governor Edwin Melrose Foley of Indiana was virtually certain of getting the Republican nomination. The Democrats were consumed with mutual character assassination and would have a hard time showing unity after the convention. Fred predicted that their nominee would be former vice-president Eric D. Beeman. The American party had already nominated charismatic senator Paul Hogarth, who had run in the last election, only losing to the president by a very small margin. He was the man the smart money was on.

A vacation cruise skyship bound for Crete that had been given up as lost over the Mediterranean six days earlier came down in southern Algeria

without the loss of any lives. A power failure had left it unable to steer or radio for help.

A second attempt to reach the planet Mars was being mounted by the French. The Germans had failed just three months before. There was to be a collaborative attempt by the USA, California and Mexico next year. The Institute had designed the great main engine for that mission's space ship.

The subway fare was going up to eighty-five cents. Fred was outraged.

A German company was now marketing a television for the home. It was only available in Europe at the moment. Could they really broadcast the same content into homes as they did into viewing clubs?

There were the standard editorials about overblown campaign promises

There was, much to Fred's relief, no mention of the new xenolite.

Apparently Johnston was a responsible enough journalist not to submit a story without confirmation. Fred decided to call him.

An hour later, Johnston joined Fred in his office.

The man who sat across from Fred Ajers was a bit older than he had expected. His voice had been young and eager, but Frank Johnston appeared to be in his late forties. He was gray at the temples and had a look in his eye that revealed he had seen a thing or two.

"Thank you for inviting me here, Doctor Ajers."

Fred met his eyes. "I didn't want the Institute to appear to be hiding anything. There will be a press release this afternoon, but I thought I would give you a first look at our latest find."

"The 'Bloop'?"

"What? I'm referring to xenolite X-009603-1."

"On the Internet, people are calling it the 'Bloop'. Catchy name, don't you think?"

Although Fred Ajers did not lack a sense of humor, he was put off by the newsman's endorsement of popularizing the object. "The Institute for Parallel Studies is not concerned with 'catchy' names for the products of its research. Perhaps you ought to see it." Fred rose from behind his desk and walked toward the door. Johnston stayed put until Fred turned and inquired, "Are you coming?"

Johnston jumped up. "Of course, yes."

There was no one in the lab. Bob Zalinsky was at lunch and his assistant had the day off. The xenolite sat on the same table where Fred had last seen it. As Fred watched the reporter handle the object, he remembered the strange sensations he experienced doing so the previous day.

"Extraordinary!" Johnston barely breathed the word. Fred voiced agreement, but the reporter seemed to barely hear him. He turned the

xenolite over in his hands several times, his eyes wide. "Bloop!" he said softly and giggled nervously.

Rolling his eyes, Fred took the object away from him and placed it gently back on the table.

"It must be a false xenolite, right?"

The reporter was referring to a rare and strange phenomenon of parallel physics, the so-called "false" xenolites. These peculiar objects are born of a strange reaction of a parallel field vibrating on a cusp between two or more xenocontinua and at the same time reflecting some element of the experimenter's perceptive imagination. The objects are not true samples from other worlds, but more like dreams made material. They come into being exclusively by accident. They cannot be found by intent. There do seem to be rules governing the way false xenolites form. For instance, one very famous example is a quarter dollar piece that is normal in every way save for the fact that it is made of Cheddar cheese. It is otherwise identical to a quarter from *our* world however, not some xenocontinuum. This indicates that some element of familiarity by the resonator operator comes into play. Another example is a tango record that glowed in the dark (through a process completely unknown) but was recorded by a familiar artist, on a known record label and could be played on quite ordinary equipment and in fact was a duplicate of a record in the researcher's personal collection save for its luminous qualities.

An operator of parallel resonant field apparatus probes with a sense of expectation of encountering an object, making a wish, as it were. The focus falters for an instant and the xenocontinuum is lost even as the transfer process has begun and a transmission of "flux" from between the worlds takes place instead. This flux manifests itself as matter, energy or some combination of the two.

It is known to science as the "Aladdin's Lamp" effect.

The discipline of studying these objects is called psudoxenology and is so baffling a science that a degree in it has never been awarded to anyone in spite of intensive work in this field. It has been suggested, only half jokingly, that this is the only hard science in which the scientific method cannot be used.

Few examples of false xenolites have dramatically violated physical laws. Oddly, one of the few to do so was the very first discovered, the celebrated eternally vibrating doorknob. This brass knob, with the imprint of a well-known Ohio manufacturer, emits a 74-cycle hum without interruption yet has no discernable source of energy. Puzzled physicists have generally described it as a "thermodynamic anomaly". Even given that peculiarity,

objects such as these are somehow connectable with human experience and imagination. This new xenolite lacked that quality. No one would have imagined this object.

"We have reason to believe that it is not. It merely originates in a xenocontinuum that divided from ours so far in the remote past that the physical arrangement of space in its world differs considerably from our own. That is really your big story here. We have succeeded in making a probe many times more distant than any that has previously taken place."

"May I take photos?" Asked Johnston.

"Please be my guest." Replied Fred.

The next day, the papers had several photos of the xenolite prominently displayed. To the dismay of Fred Ajers, the name "Bloop" seemed to have stuck.

The effect on the public was far smaller than Fred had feared and Johnston had hoped for. Johnston had assumed that this story would raise his estimation in the eyes of the journalistic world, but most seemed to view it as a "filler" type story having little impact for the average person. A curiosity, nothing more. One other result was that Johnston now thought he had a relationship with Ajers and a foot in the door at the Institute.

III

Odd Properties

The Tuesday morning exactly one week after that story appeared, Fred again sat in his office. With a napkin tucked into his shirt collar, he was happily preparing to dunk a donut into his coffee. Outside the door, he could hear Donald attempting to explain his political position to one of the junior researchers.

"Foley's pitch has too much backspin, buddy! I'd worry the same way I'd worry about my pants being stolen in a Mexican whorehouse. It's just another severed-hand-wristwatch, capt'n. Beeman doesn't have the home cookin' from his own tribe, no one to keep his balls warm for him, but Hogarth will hit all the bags and still be grinnin' when he slides, ya know what I mean?"

"No", replied the other, "I actually haven't got the slightest idea!"

It was a common joke around the Institute for senior staff to recommend Donald's "profound insights" to newcomers. Fred had heard it all before and still didn't understand most of what he said. He would only worry about it

when he started making sense. Donald had much more to say, but the phone interrupted Fred's eavesdropping. It was Bob Zalinsky.

"Fred, you have to see this!" He didn't sound upset, just somewhat excited, so Ajers didn't feel any particular anxiety about going down there.

This time he found Bob and Jeff, his assistant waiting expectantly for him. The "bloop" was sitting on the table. It presented a different appearance than it had on previous occasions, but that was no great surprise. It looked different almost every time he had seen it.

"Please pick up the xenolite, Doctor Ajers," said Bob. They were both smirking.

Thinking, "O.k., I'm game", Fred lifted the object, only to have it seemingly yanked from his grasp about two inches from the surface of the table and fall back to the surface. Calling himself a butterfingers he picked it up once more to find that he could lift it no higher than a couple of inches. When he tugged the table lifted slightly as if the "bloop" were somehow attached to it. Suspecting trickery, Fred held it up as he carefully passed his hand beneath the object to feel for anything connecting it to the table. There was nothing that he could detect.

Fred sighed. "I give up, what happened?"

Bob smiled. "Look under the table."

Fred bent down and looked beneath the inch thick tabletop to see another object somewhat like the one sitting on the surface. This one hung suspended in the air about two inches below the underside of the table. He almost banged his head as he stood up. "Another one?" he asked.

"Nope." said Jeff, "Part of the same one."

"Tell me more." said Fred.

Bob spoke up. "Jeff knocked it over this morning and found that he couldn't lift it afterwards. That's when we discovered the 'other' object. It's not another though, it's part of the same one."

Fred scratched his head. "How do you figure?"

"It's multi dimensional. The 'bloop' has a hole in it! We only see the part that is in our three dimensional space. When Jeff upset it. The tabletop passed through the hole."

Jeff had picked up the object and was moving it above the surface of the table until it went off the edge at which point he lifted it free. It appeared that he was holding one object in his hand with another suspended in the air a few inches away.

"Watch." he said.

Jeff turned one of the objects and the other, while maintaining its position in the air started to diminish in size until it vanished altogether. At the same

time another object had appeared on the opposite side. First very small, it grew rapidly as Jeff manipulated it.

"We are now seeing it at a completely different angle than we had before. When I knocked it over, I must have somehow rotated it in an unseen dimension as well."

"Christ Jesus," muttered Fred. "It's as if a three dimensional ring were to pass through a two dimensional space, it would be seen as two separate objects, but they would still be linked in the third dimension."

"That's pretty much the size of it." Said Bob.

"All right." Fred pondered for a moment. "Don't make any postings about this for twenty-four hours. I know that it seems perfectly harmless, but I want the board to know about it before the world at large does."

Fred had the two researchers make several photos to be sent up to him later and left the lab. He had to hurry to his first appointment. Fred had promised Frank Johnston that he would give him a tour of some of the facilities. He had decided to see if he could gain his friendship and thus his cooperation regarding how the Institute was presented in the press.

Johnston was waiting outside of his office when Fred arrived. He had with him some printouts of postings from the Internet concerning the institute. The one that interested him the most was one concerning "living xenolites".

Living xenolites were any plants or animals that came to the Institute via the PRFT. Most were of well-known types, but some, represented species that have no counterpart in our world.

Fred said, "So you want to see the 'zoo'? I think I can arrange that."

The animal room was on the top floor and behind triple doors to make escape, even by small creatures difficult. For some fifty years, the Institute for Parallel Studies had maintained a collection of specimens of life from various xenocontinua. Creatures of all sorts had come through over the years including at least two human beings as well as one "sort of" human being. That was, of course, Karlik Bindilo, from the xenocontinuum X-74c. He was in charge of the animal room and had become a very competent researcher since he had been accidentally collected twenty-five years before. His species had been named *homo alter* or "other man". Karlik's skin was a light brown. His hands were proportioned differently from ours, his hairline and beard pattern was unlike that of *homo sapiens* and his eyes were, by our standards, too far apart. His facial expressions were difficult to read. He had been an itinerant poet and storyteller in his own world and a master of language, so picking up English was not too difficult for him. No one had been able to learn his native tongue. Some researchers suspected that his species might be, on the average, more intelligent than our own.

Karlik welcomed Fred and introduced himself to Johnston, who didn't quite comprehend that he was not just a "funny looking fellow".

Johnston asked, "Where are you from, Mister Bindilo?" Karlik's accent had made him take a closer look at his features.

Karlik smiled indulgently. "If you must address me so formally, it would actually be something like 'Scholar Bindilo' in English, but please just call me Karlik. I lived in the countries of Haglat and LanFroeth. Now I have an apartment right here in the building."

"Haglat and Lan... Oh, I get it." His eyes grew wide. Karlik gave an indulgent smile and waved him forward to the main room.

There were cages of all sizes and creatures occupying them ranging in size from that of a mouse to that of a horse.

The first cage they were shown contained a small monkey of a species Johnston was unfamiliar with. It had dense gray fur and large eyes. "This is a monkey of the New-World variety that inhabits temperate forests in North America. In its own world, it fills an ecological niche similar to that of the gray squirrel. It is native to several xenocontinua in the X-7 region."

Another cage held two creatures that waddled on short legs about the base of a garden sundial. They both had long moist and curly trunk-like proboscises. Aside from that, they rather resembled lean badgers.

Johnston asked, "Why the sundial?" and then struck himself in the forehead and laughed. "Toves!"

Karlik and Fred both smiled and nodded. "A little joke. They do resemble toves, though, right down to their characteristic 'slithyness', so that's what we call them. They are marsupials native to South America in the X-21 xenocontinua. They feed on burrowing insects."

Another cage contained an ass that munched hay and occasionally brayed loudly. The only thing that made it peculiar was that it was striped black and white like a tiger from head to foot. Fred said, "In the X-12 worlds, these creatures live on the African veldt in enormous herds. They are known as 'zebra'."

"Are you sure that someone didn't just paint this thing?"

"Quite sure." assured Karlik.

There were several equally strange creatures including a flying mollusk resembling a squid with wings and another from a completely different xenocontinuum that was like a nautilus with a huge, but very thin, shell filled with hydrogen. There were of course several specimens that were stuffed and mounted or in jars, that for one reason or another could not reproduce at the Institute. One such animal was a worm-like being about three inches long, which apparently differed dramatically from known

creatures on a cellular level. It was from a xenocontinuum that divided from ours some two billion years ago.

There were numerous birds, both brilliant and drab, that seemed more or less like normal birds but of specific types unknown in our world.

Frank Johnston was struck by the fact that the collection of living xenolites contained no creatures known to this world.

"We get them", said Karlik, "but only keep them for a short period of study. We used to release them into the wild, but concerns over alien diseases getting into the environment has caused us to destroy animals and plants that are not to be included in the collection."

Johnston met Karlik's eyes. "What about you?"

"I spent eight years under quarantine. The entire time I begged to be returned to my old life, but it is still very hit or miss in terms of locating a particular xenocontinuum, especially one as distant as my own. They found other worlds that were populated by men such as myself, but with different histories and traditions. Eventually I was declared to be free of dangerous microbes and I was offered the chance of joining your society. It was more difficult for someone like me to blend in than someone like Donald. I became a researcher here at the Institute and I await enough improvement in the technology to someday return home."

"Do you resent what has happened to you?"

"I admit that I have had moments of resentment, but I recognize that what has become of me is so unique a circumstance that I must make the most of it. Luck is neither bad nor good, but the result of how and individual deals with the consequence of random chance. A man may chance upon a fortune and then spend his treasure in such a way that he harms himself physically or spiritually. Conversely, a man may suffer a crippling accident that saves him from fighting in a battle in which he is killed or causes him to focus on a previously hidden talent that enriches himself and those around him. I am a poet who has been granted a small view of eternity. If the day comes that I return to my home, I will be able to bring a new kind of vision to my people. If that day never comes, I have brought a vision of my people to yours."

Fred said, "Karlik has been writing several books about his world and is an avid student of several others including this one."

Karlik led on to a greenhouse that contained samples of flora from other worlds.

There was one plant that looked rather like wheat, but was in fact a close relative of maize. It produced small sheathed seed heads with about a dozen kernels each. It had been discovered in the form of seeds. There were a variety of unfamiliar flowers, some of which appeared to be the product of

selective breeding. There were also various fruit trees, mostly grown from xenolithic seeds and pits. Not all of them were thriving as their particular soil chemistry and temperature requirements could only be guessed at.

In a grassy pen in the greenhouse lived several rabbit-like creatures. Closer examination revealed that they were very un-rabbit-like in many particulars. For one thing, they laid eggs. Johnston was informed that they were actually a monotreme native to central Asia in the X-12 worlds, but extinct in about half of them. It was about a third smaller than the common cottontail and had gray fur with red stripes along its muscular thighs. It had gnawing teeth with a pronounced underbite and its small eyes seemed unnaturally close to its snout. There were other animals amongst the plants in the greenhouse, several worms and insects and a number of small rodents. There was a mouse-sized flying squirrel that Frank Johnston found particularly interesting.

In the trees were some tiny, flightless bats that had evolved to dig grubs from tree bark. They resembled small tarsiers except that they had huge ears rather than huge eyes. It was quite easy for them to hear their prey crawling beneath the surface, or even the sounds of their metabolic functions when they were at rest.

There came a page over the intercom for Fred.

"Doctor Ajers. You are needed in Laboratory Seven immediately."
Zalinsky's lab. Fred excused himself and rushed out of the room.

IV

Mishap

Fred Ajers arrived at the door of the lab where several people had gathered. Outside, the mail girl was sitting against the wall hugging her knees weeping loudly and wetly. He pushed his way through and then yelped in horror when he saw what had once been Jeffrey Winbury lying on the floor. He instantly folded in the middle and vomited on the floor, dimly noting that he had not been the first person to react in this way. Bob Zalinsky was at his side helping him straighten up.

"Sweet Jesus!" Fred wiped his lips on his sleeve. "What happened? What in the name of God happened?!?"

"Jeff was photographing the 'bloop'...moving it into different positions. We had come to the conclusion that it is actually a far larger object than it appears to be, about the size and weight of an upright piano maybe, but we

had only been seeing little pieces of it. Jeff was trying to pull it hard to show more of it and most of its weight must have gone off balance in some way while he was holding onto it. He got yanked in a direction *we don't go*." Bob's lower lip started to quiver. "It was over in less than a second. Part of him, the part that isn't there anymore, got pulled in. I guess we simply can't *exist* there. In that space." Bob's face was ashen, clearly still in shock, himself.

Fred tried to imagine it. Suddenly every one of Jeff's body cells was *open* on one or more sides. That part of him must have been reduced to a vapor instantly, the atoms themselves must have dissolved. It looked as if his body had simply been sliced through at a strange angle. His right knee joint had passed through leaving that calf and foot detached from the rest of the corpse. His entire right arm and upper right thorax were missing, as was half of his head. It resembled a particularly disturbing anatomical demonstration. His clothing looked like it had been neatly trimmed with a scissors at the cut off point. There was a shocking amount of blood forming a crimson pond around the lab assistant's remains. Fred noticed that slightly less than half a pair of glasses lay on the floor next to Jeff. The sectioned part of the lens was mirror smooth.

The 'bloop', now a foot-long oblong with a pyramid shaped protrusion, lay against the far wall. Another part of it about the size of an egg, hung in the air several inches off the floor two feet away.

"My God!", exclaimed a voice from the doorway. Bob and Fred looked over to see Frank Johnston standing there surveying the macabre tableaux.

"*Oh, how wonderful.*" Thought Fred, sarcastically.

Dealing with the police was nothing compared to dealing with Johnston. As far as the cops were concerned, what had happened was an industrial accident, albeit a unique and bizarre one. Johnston, on the other hand, insisted that there was an overwhelming public interest in this. The board of directors, within a half hour of the incident, had informed Fred Ajers that publicity must be kept to a minimum. They made sure he knew that his job depended on it.

Jeff's only living relative, a brother, lived in Chicago and would simply be told that the death was the result of a lab accident. His body needed to be kept for examination, but the brother would be sent a small canister of ashes belonging to someone else. It was now understood that the "bloop" had to be handled with utmost care. Even putting it in a bank vault would not insure its containment. If jarred or knocked over in a certain way, it might simply pass through (or rather *around*) the steel walls.

Ajers all but begged Frank Johnston not to leave the institute until he had a chance to speak with him. He agreed after Fred threatened to cut him off from any future access save for the standard press releases.

"I understand that you find this incident newsworthy," began Fred, "but I implore you to be sympathetic to the sensitive approach we must take to it. After last week, I inquired regarding your access to the Internet. It would be an unjust misfortune for your sister to lose her high paying job at Whitney Pharmaceutical for providing unauthorized access."

Johnston had never told Ajers the source of his access, but it didn't surprise him that he had found out. "It's not illegal." Johnston reddened upon hearing the threat. "The internet is a public forum!"

"Yes, but access is granted to authorized persons associated with member institutions. I ask you, do you have such authorization? Is your career and reputation worth risking hers?"

Johnston glared at Fred Ajers, but remained silent.

Fred continued. "I truly want you to be able to see that nothing sinister is going on at the Institute. We can give you *authorized* internet access and detailed reports of activities that go on here."

"And what will that cost me?"

"A commitment to responsible reportage. I don't mean we are going to pay you to be quiet about things, but we will stipulate that your special access will be dependant on your willingness to work with us."

"Special access in exchange for controlled reporting?"

"Responsible reporting. We have a free press, you can write what you please, but your opportunities will be greatly multiplied in the future and your risky Internet access at Whitney will be able to be terminated. So far as I know, you will be the only newsman in America that will have full access to the net. You will be able to post inquiries as well as read the postings of others." Now *that* was a pretty tasty carrot to dangle in front of him.

It was not without some reservations that he thought were best kept to himself that Frank Johnston accepted Fred's offer. He was given his own office with his own memex across the hall from Fred.

V

Inside the Institute

The Sun-Herald did report on the accidental death of Jeff Winbury, but characterized the incident as an explosion of a piece of equipment.

In the weeks that followed, Johnston learned that Fred had not lied when he said that the extraordinary was commonplace at the Institute. Every other day he saw something that he could never rationally ever have expected to see.

The discovery of xenolites, he learned, was more art than science. One thing he had not been shown when he was outside of the Institute was an actual probe being run. The “Observatory” was located next door to the research and office building at 996 Massachusetts Avenue. It was joined to 998 by an underground tunnel and a second walkway at the third floor level.

The new high-powered PRFT that had discovered the “bloop” had been installed in the observatory with heavy-duty bleeder pins to prevent overloads of the type that had yielded that particular xenolite. They were hoping that the new machine would be able to capture objects of greater mass from closer xenocontinua.

Fred Ajers and Frank Johnston were there on the morning of Monday, June 12th. The first real runs with the equipment were due to take place in a few minutes.

Zalinsky was the technician in charge of the fine-tuning of the equipment along with his new assistant, a graduate student named Jenny Harvey. The probe team would be Edward Wright and Paul Cromwell. Wright was the researcher who had conceived the massive new PRFT although it had been up to Zalinsky to build it.

Frank Johnston was taking notes of his impressions of the activities in the room as he awaited the test. Fred Ajers conferred with the principals of the test making sure that it would be a model operation. Again and again he reminded them that this was the first test parallel probe to be witnessed by a reporter.

One of the great misconceptions about parallel field devices is that they are typical electrical machines. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although the big new resonator did include electric motors and servos to position various of its parts, the forces used to generate the parallel field has nothing whatsoever to do with standard electromagnetic forces. The PRFT utilizes a force that is commonly referred to as “static gravity” to engender a disturbance in the all-pervading parallel field of the universe. The force is called static gravity because of its most immediately noticeable feature is the interruption of the gravitational field in some directions. For this reason, parallel devices have become very useful in space flight and were formerly used in large skyships to improve their lifting capacity. The static gravity charge was produced by a *mollot cell*, or in this case, by a battery of mollot

cells. The mollot cell is named for its inventor Alexander Rodman Mollot who created the first true resonator in the first decade of the twentieth century. Earlier experiments performed by Valdmarr Poulsen, the renowned Danish inventor, inspired Mollot to do closer studies of certain anomalous reactions. A measuring device known as a *determinator* that he created utilized a very primitive static gravity cell, now known in parallel science as a *poulsen jar*, for mass adjustment. Poulsen stumbled on the property of the device by accident and only used it in this single device. The determinator was never mass manufactured and Mollot only learned of it by seeing the original device in a Copenhagen museum.

Cromwell started the positioning motors on the big resonator to bring the bleeder pins into proximity of the large mollot cells while Doctor Wright hand adjusted two of the forty-six centimeter phase plates. The nine-centimeter phase plates would be adjusted by micron precision servos linked to phased field sensors that would lock them when a xenocontinuum at the prescribed distance was encountered.

The final startup sequence was initiated as the bleeder pins were brought within two millimeters of the cell casings. Subtle bands came into vague focus in the air around the device and the numbers on the display clicked over. "X1-d", it read.

"Full activation." Said Doctor Cromwell.

The counter clicked upward. X7-c, X9-a, X10-n, X12-b.

The banding was becoming more pronounced. It looked like the air was filled with ripples as on the surface of a pond.

Johnston reached out to attempt to touch one of the distorted regions. Ajers reached out and grabbed his wrist. "Perhaps not the best idea." he said. Fred reached for a pen from Johnston's pocket and prodded a ripple. The pen seemed to twist and writhe. Fred let it drop to the floor, then picked it up and handed it to Johnston. The pen had been a *Stilex* aluminum disposable. Now it was made of clear plastic and had the name *Bic* on the barrel. Johnston gave a low whistle. "Your very own xenolite." commented Fred.

Johnston's eyes bugged out as he turned the transformed pen over in his hand. "Do you always get the equivalent of what you put into the field?" asked Johnston.

"About sixty percent of the time for small objects. The technicians call low-mass objects 'tight focus' objects. It seems to be easier for them to find a common resonance with their counterparts. Larger objects produce exact counterparts far less frequently. Of course, the majority of times an object introduced into the field will simply disappear without any mass exchange at all."

The field was starting to pulse rhythmically. Ajers' face was crossed with an expression of concern.

"Shutdown!" called out Cromwell, "Overloading!"

"Clear the room!" shouted Wright.

As Ajers and Johnston both backed off from the resonator, the field pulsed outward one more time and the entire room vanished.

Fred Ajers and Frank Johnston stood in a dimly lit room with cinderblock walls. Ducts ran along the low ceiling and what was apparently a water heater stood in a corner. There were boxes of papers against one wall and some other objects that were more difficult to identify. There was what was obviously a bicycle, but differing in many details from ones the two men had seen before. It had wide tires with deep, knobby tread. Daylight streamed in through a small dirty window near the ceiling.

VI

Marooned

"Damnation!" cursed Fred.

"What happened?" asked Johnston. The reporter sat on the dusty floor in a state of disorientation.

"Hell and damnation!" Fred cursed once more. "The field got us! We have crossed into a xenocontinuum."

"What? Which one? How do we get back? *Can* we get back?"

"I don't know. I don't know. I don't know." Said Fred, answering each question in turn. "We are in a basement. We should probably get out of here."

"Whose basement?"

"How the devil should I know?" asked Fred impatiently.

The question was answered by footsteps on the stairs. "Who's down there?" called a female voice.

Fred pulled the reporter to his feet and hissed, "We have to get out of here! *Now!*"

Fred dashed for the stairs with Johnston on his heels. The woman that stood at the top of the stairs was shockingly underdressed. She wore tight trousers that ended mid-thigh and what was not much more than a kerchief tied around her back and neck confining her breasts and a pair of rubber sandals. She appeared to be in her early twenties.

Fred Ajers decided to attempt a bluff. "Good day, Madam! We are from the Cambridge electro-works doing a routine equipment check."

The young woman looked puzzled. "*Electro-works?*"

Fred hadn't expected to be tripped up quite so quickly. He had to continue.

"I'm so sorry, Madam, we would have informed you ahead of time, but we were on a tight schedule. Rest assured that your electrical tax will be adjusted accordingly."

"*Electrical tax?*" She wasn't having any of it, the only thing to do was keep moving and talking until they reached the street.

As gently as possible, Fred nudged the girl aside so that he and Johnston could pass.

"Did Mister Denardo call you? He didn't post a message on the bulletin board about it."

"He did indeed, Madam." Explained Fred. They had entered a common hallway floored with dirty maroon linoleum.

"Do you think you could stop calling me 'madam'?"

"Of course, Miss. Now we have other stops to make, and must be on our way. Give our best to Mister Demarco."

"Denardo." Muttered the woman as the two barged out the front door and onto the sidewalk. "What the fuck?" she said to no one in particular as she turned and slammed the door behind them. It made Fred blush to hear that particular word used by a woman.

From inside Ajers and Johnston heard another voice inquire, "Who was that?"

"Just some fucking crazy homeless guys trying to squat in the basement. I got rid of them. You should have seen the costumes they were wearing. Homeless gays, I guess."

The street was indeed Massachusetts Avenue, but almost none of the buildings were as they should have been. The building that they had just exited was not the observatory of the Institute, but an apartment block. There was a small market in the same building and a store that dealt in some sort of recorded entertainment called *West Coast Video*. The people on the street were remarkably heterogeneous. No two seemed to resemble one another in any particular, be it dress or race or even language.

Ajers and Johnston were at a total loss as to what their course of action should be. They started walking toward Harvard Square not having the slightest idea as to what they would find there.

Above their heads they noticed lines being drawn through the sky as if it were a vast blue chalkboard accompanied by a distant roar.

“What was the last reading you saw on the dial before we ended up here?” asked Fred.

“X12-b, I think.”

“X12-b. It is one of the worlds that are pretty close to our own. We should be able to get by mostly undetected if we play our cards right. Those lines are made by aircraft. Jet engine powered aeroplanes.”

“That tells me almost nothing. What is a ‘jet engine’? What is an ‘aeroplane’?”

“Non-buoyant aerodynamic surfaces keep it aloft, but it must be constantly moving for it to work. A jet engine compresses air and fuel and ejects it to propel the aircraft. They are much faster than freight and tourist skyships, but much slower than military skyships and spaceships.”

Johnston shook his head. He had been there but a few moments and already the utter strangeness of this new world was straining his imagination. “You say this world is *close* to ours?”

“Yes. The point of historical divergence is thought to be less than two hundred years ago and the most dramatic differences are in the twentieth century.”

“It looks very different to me.”

“It is different in hundreds of superficial ways, but this is still a country called ‘The United States of America’ and this is still a state called ‘Massachusetts’. The people here speak English. Although there will be many variances in specific terminology and usage, we can still make ourselves understood. We will need to quickly acquire some cultural literacy if we are to blend in, but let me assure you, this could have been *much* worse.”

Frank Johnston’s face sagged into a mask of total despair. “How?!?” he wailed, “How could this be worse?”

“Frank”, said Fred, using Johnston’s Christian name for the first time since they had been acquainted, “You *must* get a hold of yourself. We are lucky that there are *people* here. We are lucky that there is a planet Earth here. We could have ended up like Jeff Winbury had we been drawn into the xenocontinuum where the ‘bloop’ originated. We have a chance, a very good chance, at survival here.”

The street was fairly busy with traffic. The vehicles were recognizably automobiles although of fanciful design. The passers by were all looking them over. Obviously, their costume was unorthodox enough by the standards of this world to draw stares. Indeed, many the men they saw on the sidewalk wore what appeared to, for them, be more or less normal business attire, but it differed in detail considerably from the suits worn by Ajers and

Johnston. The jackets were much shorter with the collars worn down rather than up and their neckties were longer, narrower and knotted differently. The trousers were more or less the same, but their shoes tended to have laces rather than buttons. In this world, Johnston and Ayers might easily have passed for circus performers. One saving grace was that there seemed to be no real standard haircut and both men wore theirs short and brushed straight back.

Their money would obviously be useless, although Fred had a few gold coins that might trade on their metal value. They decided that selling them off should be their first move.

They located a public telephone in Harvard Square, although it took them a few moments to recognize it as such. It seemed to be called a “Verizon” in this world. They were disappointed to find that there was no directory available. They asked directions to a public library, which, they discovered, was at the exact same location as the one in their own world. The Harvard University campus they crossed through on the way to the library also appeared much the same to them.

They found telephone directories there and swiftly located the addresses of coin shops and jewelers who bought gold. All of them were in Boston and that meant a bit of a hike. They still had no local currency save for a dime that Johnston picked up off the sidewalk. They didn’t recognize the portrait on it, nor had they expected to. The library also had *public* Internet access via devices far more advanced than the memex communicators of their home. The Internet that they connected to was also far removed from the one they had previously accessed.

It was a fine spring morning and the walk to Boston was pleasant enough. It gave them time to casually observe their surroundings while went. Cambridge city hall was almost exactly the same building as the one they were familiar with, but it was one of only a very few. Near the river stood a Massachusetts Institute of Technology quite different from the one with which they were familiar. It was of a far grander scale and the students who swarmed the campus seemed to represent every nation on Earth. The view from the bridge, revealed Boston to be a city that encompassed, as in their own world, the old and the new, but the new, in this case was entirely divergent from that with which they were familiar. Ajers and Johnston agreed that the skyscrapers of this world were not as interesting as those of their own Boston. They seemed more boxy and businesslike. Docking masts for shyships were conspicuous by their absence.

The pair saw people walking along using pocket-sized communicators, personal Verizons, they presumed. Many other persons had what seemed to

be small personal entertainment devices worn on their belts or carried in a pocket that put music or news directly into their ears using tiny speakers connected by fine wires. Everyone was connected in some way or another, a whole society absorbing information all the time.

People *ran* everywhere. There appeared to be an obsession with physical culture. Each with their tiny entertainment devices, men and women ran through the streets. The newcomers were again struck by the near-nudity that women were willing to display in public. Many of the female runners wore only a bra top and a pair of tiny shorts. In spite of its brevity, the attire of the runners was more or less unadorned save for the brilliantly colored and surfaced shoes. The variety and complexity of the footwear was mind-boggling. Both Ajers and Johnston found the muscularity of the women somewhat off-putting compared with the ideal of female beauty they were accustomed to.

A jeweler on Bromfield Street bought the four gold coins they had between them and a gold saint Christopher medal that Johnston had for a total of five hundred and twenty-one dollars and sixty-five cents. The jeweler barely gave the coins a look save for what was required to weigh and assay them. Ajers and Johnston would likely be long gone before their strange vintage became apparent, and even then would probably draw little comment. They were, after all, 24-carat gold.

They didn't know if the money they had gotten was a lot or a little. The face value of the coins had totaled about sixty dollars, with the medal being worth an additional ten. They discovered that the buying power of their new dollars was rather less than they were used to. Fred figured that they would exchange about three for one, which meant that they had still done well on the deal because the price of gold was rather higher in this xenocontinuum.

Fred Ajers and Frank Johnston lunched on cheese and ground beef patty sandwiches with Coca-Cola. To their surprise and delight, the beverage was precisely the same as the version they knew and loved.

Between bites of "cheeseburger", Fred said, "We should find a second hand clothing store so that we can blend in somewhat."

Frank agreed and added, "We must also secure lodging."

A place called "Goodwill" provided them with less conspicuous apparel for very little money, but lodging proved to be more of a problem. Even the cheapest rooming houses seemed to be quite expensive. They finally took a room together at one hundred dollars a week in the Back Bay. Fred sensed that the landlady's assumption that they were homosexual. He hoped that she wouldn't prove to be too much of a busybody.

The room had its own television although it didn't look much like the device that they knew. This was a small box with a screen that could easily sit on a table. After they figured out how to turn it on, it produced a clear image in natural color. The programming was baffling. Everything moved from subject to subject without announcement and the programs were frequently interrupted for advertising in such a way that continuity seemed impossible to follow. They assumed that one got used to it. It was part of the parlance of the medium. The content was alternately violent, loud and bawdy, making it rather like television in their own America, but in this world, that type of content came into private homes where children could easily see it! Later, they would see some children's programming, which was even stranger and more shocking than that aimed at adults.

There was a presidential campaign underway here as there had been at home, but of course different candidates were involved and different issues were at the heart of it. All of this was discussed in conversational shorthand based on assumed long acquaintance with the issues and their history that rendered it impossible for the outworlders to understand. Only the candidates of two major political parties were regarded as possible victors in this race. There were other contenders, but they were barely ever mentioned. The television proved to be their best tool for gaining a rapid acquaintance with the local culture.

They had been in their new circumstances less than a day and already they had considerably reduced their fortune. They resolved to seek some sort of employment the following day.

Fred made a most alarming discovery when he went to find a job. The manager of a small all-night market had been ready to hire him almost solely on the basis that he spoke grammatical English, when he discovered that he had no "social security" number. Without it, he was unemployable and actually suspect of criminality or being an illegal alien. The second was, in fact, true. A little research revealed that the need for "ID" was of overwhelming importance. Undocumented persons were not tolerated in spite of the fact that the society in general did not view itself as totalitarian.

This United States of America had almost twice the population of Fred and Frank's native country. This was partially due to California, the Hawaiian Islands and Alaska being states (but Cuba and Puerto Rico were not and the state of Napoleana didn't even exist!), and also attributable to much higher levels of immigration and a population burst called the "Baby Boom".

Another fact of life about this alternate 20th century became known to Frank Johnston, that being so-called "nuclear power". The X12 timelines

were restricted because of their discovery of weapons based on the fission and fusion of atoms. Fred informed Frank, that should they ever get home, he could never write about this aspect of their sojourn. Secretly, Fred knew he didn't have a lot to worry about. They had precious little reason to expect to ever return home.

Discrete inquiries led them to a provider of forged documents for illegal aliens. They soon had essential identification including birth certificates, social security numbers and out-of-state drivers licenses. They also had only seventy-five dollars left. Employment had to be secured by both of them immediately.

Bussing tables, a "profession" that Fred Ajers had held for a while in his youth, was one thing that was precisely the same in this world as in his own, and every bit as rewarding as he had remembered. He was paid two dollars and sixty-five cents an hour plus a share of the tips that he had to personally collect from the waiters and waitresses at the end of their shifts. Several of them routinely vanished without making the requisite donation.

Johnston did slightly better, with his typing skills being able to get him temporary office work. While he was more or less baffled by office "computers", several books from the public library, purportedly written for "dummies", helped him through many rough spots. He actually made seven dollars and fifty cents an hour, but didn't get work every day.

The meager income promised little opportunity to upgrade their lifestyle and the amount of time needed to earn it kept the process of research on a way home slow.

VII

Adapting

Months passed and the two barely noticed. Of course they became more proficient in the ways of the new world and worked their way into better jobs. Johnston became an assistant at the public library, while Ajers started "inventing" things. In spite of the fact that he had no credentials, he managed to land a job at a place called the Lucent Corporation writing a research proposal that put forth the concept of static gravity without divulging the entire technology behind parallel physics. He instinctively knew that he shouldn't give away the work of the Institute if he didn't

absolutely have to. By planting tantalizing clues and with a little luck, he might be allowed to fabricate the proper equipment to attempt escape. Even if he was allowed to get that far, the chances were many thousand to one. The device that had gotten them here was the most advanced of its kind and while he understood the basics, he had been an administrator, not an engineer working with the equipment on a daily basis.

Fred continued working with very simple lab demonstrations in static gravity, but had come to realize that the people he was working with were too smart. The other engineers could put the whole concept of parallel fields together if they were given any more clues. Already one of them had stumbled on the idea of phase damping although he still was unaware of its significance.

Ajers spent many evenings attending various “rock ‘n’ roll” shows. One thing he liked about his situation, perhaps the only thing, was his unrestricted access to this particular cultural phenomenon. Johnston, on the other hand regarded the native music as mere noise and insisted that Fred use headphones while listening in the apartment. Fred’s frequent evenings out gave Frank Johnston a chance to continue work on his book about their experiences without interruption. On one afternoon, Fred saw a flyer for a show at a place called “The Middle East” featuring bands called *Uncle Ed*, *The Gnostics*, *Angels of Ambience*, and *The Moops*. He had learned that the Middle East was once a hole-in-the-wall Syrian restaurant that blossomed into a local rock ‘n’ roll Mecca when they started presenting live music. He had to go.

He had more or less gotten used to the peculiar appearances of attendees at rock ‘n’ roll shows. They were mostly in their twenties and tended to dress for the occasion to reflect highly specific identity niches within the already complex youth culture. Hardly any of them would willingly identify their exact affiliation, but it could generally be discerned by taking note of whom they were critical of and what performers they held in highest esteem. Indeed the greatest goal of a band was to become the nucleus of its own sub-cultural segment. In some cases, the subculture, or *fans* as they were called, would be a worldwide network that would collect and trade information and music recordings as well as attend every performance of the band that their resources would allow. A band that had achieved this enviable status could even continue to possess its cult even if the band itself had ceased to exist.

Fred, being slightly older than the typical frequenter of the “club scene”, had no such affiliations but was becoming an avid listener of several local acts. In particular, *The Gnostics* had garnered a great deal of his attention for their fine musicianship, their interesting lyrics and their attractive female

bass player, Audrey Allen. She was a petite, pale-skinned beauty with waste-length hair, jet black save for a broad streak of crimson. A tattooed thorny vine spiraled up her left arm ending with a full-blown red rose just below her shoulder.

He had made every effort to get to know her and inquired with her acquaintances regarding her status. He discovered that she was in a relationship with Ronny Burk, who went by the name “Ronny Pure”, the band’s lead singer. There was hope, however, because Audrey was very put off by Burk’s constant drinking. He also tended to ignore her and was rumored to sleep with other women. The fellow sounded altogether charming. They fought frequently and were on the verge of breakup. Fred made it a project to get to know her.

The Middle East show was the second time in a week that he had gone out to see the band and he sent Audrey a drink after their set. He had done this on two previous occasions on which she had merely waved and smiled her thanks across the room. This time she came over and joined him at the table.

Their conversation was necessarily carried on in raised voices, for *the Moops* were pounding out their tunes loud and fast.

“I’ve seen you at a lot of our gigs.” She shouted.

“I’m a big fan.” Fred shouted back. “Of the band and of you.”

She held eye contact as if attempting to study his inner mind. “You don’t even know me.”

“A situation that I would hope to correct.”

A slight smile found its way onto her lips. “I have a boyfriend, you know.” The din in the club partially garbled her words.

“What?” Shouted Fred, pretending not to have understood. She didn’t repeat herself.

“I’ve never heard an accent like yours. Where are you from?”

“I was born in Pittsburgh, but I have lived in Cambridge for most of my adult life.”

“No, that’s not Pittsburgh.”

“I went to school in Europe.”

She nodded her head as if that explained everything about him.

They chatted for a while, mostly about music, until Tony, the drummer from her band, came over and told her it was time to pack up the equipment.

“Where’s Ronny?” She inquired.

Tony indicated the door. “He went out to smoke with that girl from Angels of Ambience, the redhead, over an hour ago.”

“That asshole.” She said it without surprise or particular rancor, as if his personal failings were so familiar to her that she no longer had a use for

anger. "Fine, lets just pack up and go, he can find his own way home." She turned to Fred and placed her hand on his arm across the table. As she leaned forward, she exposed quite a bit of cleavage. "We play at the Zeitgeist on Saturday, I *really* hope you'll come by."

"I wouldn't dream of missing it."

"I love the way you talk!" She smiled broadly, white teeth and ruby red lips and then was gone.

Fred Ajers was distracted the rest of the week. His work seemed suddenly peripheral. When Audrey had touched him, he felt his first gut level connection with the world he now inhabited. Frank Johnston noted several times that Ajers was walking around with a stupid expression on his face.

Audrey went with Fred for coffee after the performance on Saturday.

"It's nice to talk without having to shout." Said Fred.

"I guess I'm used to it. I spend so much time in clubs."

"I haven't until recently. I have mostly been listening to recorded music."

"I swear, I have never heard an accent like yours." She met his eyes. "It's really kind of cute." Fred realized that it was a compliment. In his world, *cute* indicated insignificance, but here it was intended to mean charming. He discovered that his stomach felt light.

They found that they had many common interests in art and music although his knowledge of twentieth century art was limited, and even though he was familiar with many individual works, he felt little of their cultural resonance. They were able to connect about much of the work from the nineteenth century, but it was obvious that he understood little of the modern.

"I want to take you to the museum." Said Audrey.

Fred flushed slightly. "I would be honored to put my education in your hands."

They agreed to visit the Harvard Fogg art museum the following day.

The two met in Harvard Square where they had strong, burnt-tasting coffee at a place called "Starbucks". Fred, early in his sojourn in the new world, had discovered that these places were just about everywhere and that coffee was far from the simple beverage he had known.

Audrey had shown up in a pair of blue jeans and a tight fitting t-shirt that did little to obscure her natural curves and also was short enough to reveal that she had a small silver ring pierced through her navel. It was an outfit that would have gotten her both laughed at and arrested in his world, yet he found it quite charming nonetheless. Her red accented black tresses were formed into a long braid reaching to the small of her back. It amazed Fred

how appealing he found this woman. In his world, she would look like something between a harlot and a savage.

Fred found the museum enlightening. Much of the pre-twentieth century work was familiar to him or was composed in recognizable styles. A number of artists working around the turn of the century seemed to have turned everything on its ear. One of the more frequently mentioned names he had never heard of at all, another in an entirely different context. The first was the Spaniard, Picasso who was seemingly driven by whimsy and a love of uncouth shapes. The Frenchman, Duchamp was known to Fred as the foremost chess master of the first half of the twentieth century. Apparently, in this world he became a singularly influential artist. The museum contained none of his works except for a small briefcase, displayed opened in a glass case, containing small reproductions of a number of things that were difficult to view as works of art. A urinal, a sealed glass capsule, a cracked window inscribed with what might perhaps be mathematical diagrams and mechanical illustrations. Fred realized that he lacked the cultural context in which to place these things. In a way, he was happy that the museum was not totally devoted to these modernities. Each one befuddled him in a different way. A canvas by a fellow named Pollock left him reluctant to comment. It came from an esthetic that was beyond his understanding. A small composition by a person named Kandinsky seemed to bridge the barrier between the written word and the picture. It was an entirely different form of communication, effecting sub-verbal and sub-visual parts of consciousness. The title was *Jocular Sounds* and it actually held the feeling of the title even though it was silent and pictorially represented no real object. It was all quite fascinating and quite alien.

Later, by the side of the river, they ate sandwiches that were made by rolling flour tortillas around seasoned rice with what seemed to be peanut-butter and chicken with pickled cabbage. Fred had never tasted anything like it. Audrey said it was Thai style. Fred knew ythat Thailand was what Siam was known as in this world, but the foods of that nation were not common in the America he knew.

As they spoke, Audrey became more bemused by Fred's deficiencies. He was obviously intelligent and highly educated, but unaware of so many things that an educated man could not help but know. He had to stop and think before he could remember who Lenin was. He was a huge rock 'n' roll fan, but had never heard of many key performers. He had asked her who *the Doors* were. He didn't know who Howard Stern was.

Audrey said, "You seem like you're from another world!"

Fred was taken aback. He blanched slightly. “What makes you say that?!?”, he stammered out.

She was surprised at the intensity of his reaction. “I only mean that you don’t know about a lot of things that *everyone* knows about. It’s kind of odd, that’s all.”

“What if I *was* from another world?”

Audrey briefly rubbed her temples. “Please, *please* don’t tell me you came from a flying saucer or something.”

“What? No! I just have a few gaps in my education.”

“Thank God. I have met so many guys who turned out to be crazy or liars or just plain assholes.”

“I’m not a lying crazy asshole, I promise.” Fred *had* actually taken great care not to actually lie to Audrey, unless one were to count key omissions.”

“So what is it then? Have you been in prison or something?”

Fred pondered for a moment and then made a decision. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a dime and handed it to Audrey. She took it and looked at it.

“What’s this?”

“An American dime. A ten-cent piece.”

“The fuck it is. It’s the wrong size, and that’s just for starters. Who is this guy?”

“It’s ‘Uncle Clem’, Clement Paul McKittrick, president of the United States, 1933 to 1940.”

She eyed him evenly, attempting to look angry, but a tiny smile was hidden behind it. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Just because I’m a little curious, you have to go and make fun of me!” She reached over and started tickling Fred.

Of all the possible reactions to his revelation, this was not one he had considered. He tickled back until they both fell upon the grass laughing. Audrey gave him a light peck on the lips and said, “I won’t treat you like a dummy if you don’t tease me anymore, o.k.?”

“I’ll do anything you say for another of those.” She kissed him again, this time letting it linger for a second or two.

That evening Johnston observed that Fred wore a particularly stupid expression on his face. “Need I point out that our stay here grows ever longer while you waste time dallying with that preposterous looking woman and get nothing done toward ending our exile.” We shall be marooned here forever at this rate!”

Fred replied, “We probably will be anyway. Even if I can construct a resonator of sufficient power to return us, I have little knowledge of precise

field calibrations and those I do know use our home world as a baseline, not this one. I think we had better make ourselves comfortable.”

Johnston said, “I have a wife and a young son. Do not give me hope if there is none, but if there is, I must insist that you do all in your power to act on it.”

Fred was truly sympathetic, but he knew that he had been doing his best. He was only beginning to accept the truth that their situation was most likely permanent. “Frank, it’s not *impossible* that we will ever get home, but it is very unlikely. We are best off building lives for ourselves here because our lives there are over.”

Johnston hung his head, a mourner at his own funeral. “We are in the afterlife and are yet mortal. This is not a fate that I might have expected.”

“Fate is what you make of it. Remember Karlick? We have been given an opportunity.”

For a while after that conversation, Frank became withdrawn and buried himself in studies. He wrote, and managed to get published, a “fantasy” novel. Only he and Fred knew that it was mostly a memoir of their former life.

Over time, Fred became more deeply involved with Audrey. Before too long, Ronny Pure was no longer in the picture, either in Audrey’s life or The Gnostics, having been thrown out of the band for showing up drunk at too many performances.

VIII

More Odd Properties

A Year passed.

Frank Johnston became a well known guest at science fiction conventions and had completed a second book in what promised to be a lengthy and complex series. Fred continued at Lucent, but his original work was increasingly marginalized in favor of more money-making projects. He was only slightly disappointed. His real focus had become promoting The Gnostics.

Fred had explained his real situation to Audrey although she didn't seem to actually believe it. She indulged his apparent fantasy as a harmless idiosyncrasy and was willing to listen to detailed descriptions of his home world as engaging fiction. Fred understood her reluctance to believe and

didn't insist too strongly on it, besides, everything else about their relationship was wonderful.

After Fred successfully got a record contract for the Gnostics in 2002, he decided to start promoting other bands as well, including Ronny Pure's new band, *Jagged*, and he took an office in Cambridge at 1000 Massachusetts avenue. This was coincidentally at the same geographic location of the Institute for Parallel Studies office building where he had worked in his own world and next door to the apartment building in which he and Johnston has appeared in this one.

He offered office space to Frank Johnston at a low rate, partially because he still needed occasional help with his computer and partially because he felt better with Johnston nearby. He and Johnston had never actually become friends in the standard sense, but they shared the common bond of mutual heritage. The relationship was almost like that of brothers who didn't always get along but were connected by something deeper.

Tuesday, the eleventh of June, 2002 was a warm spring day. It was almost exactly two years that Johnston and Ajers had been in X12-B. Audrey had come up to the office to meet Fred for lunch. As they were discussing the various merits of Indian food Versus sushi. Fred's cell phone beeped. He had long since learned that it was not called a *verizion*.

Without benefit of greeting or pleasantries, the voice of Frank Johnston came from the device. "Ajers! Get out front now! It's an emergency!"

Reading Fred's expression, Audrey asked, "What's going on?"

Fred said, "I don't know. Frank has a problem."

Fred couldn't see the area in front of the building from his office window, so he had to dash down the stairs as quickly as he could.

On the brick paved plaza in front of the building stood Frank Johnston looking down at something Fred couldn't immediately see. He still held his cell-phone in his hand. As he came closer, he saw that Frank was watching an object the size of a golf ball. It seemed to alter shape as he watched.

Fred came up beside him followed by Audrey. "It's the *Bloop*." Said Frank.

"I believe you're right!"

"What *is* that thing? I can hardly even look at it!" Said Audrey.

"I told you about it. It's that multi-dimensional xenolite."

She responded very quietly. "But that was just a story."

Fred reached down and gingerly picked up the object. It expanded somewhat as he lifted it. "Interesting. Since it has higher dimensions, it can't fit into only one three-dimensional universe. It's here at the same time as it's in the lab back home and God knows where else."

Audrey clutched at his arm. "You're creeping me out, baby."

Frank exclaimed, "Maybe we can use it as a way to communicate with home!"

"You're mad! This object is dangerous, remember Jeff Winbury?"

"We would have to be careful, but we can't let this go!"

With great care they took the object up to the office and set it on Frank's desk.

When Fred set it down, it shifted in shape and doubled in size. "Look, it rolled in some direction. I think that whatever we are going to do with it, we should do quickly before it disappears altogether."

Audrey couldn't take her eyes off of the object, but she was also afraid to approach it. She sat fidgeting in a chair near the door. "It's true...it's true...", she muttered to no one in particular.

Over the next few days, Ajers and Johnston examined the object, studying the way it could be moved. Fred now wished that he had attempted to understand Bob Zalinski's notes a little more clearly.

Fred was also concerned with trying to get Audrey to speak with him. She had left a message on his phone explaining that she was "freaked out" and needed a couple of days on her own. She had not returned any of his calls nor has she answered the door when he went by her apartment. Finally, after four days, they had a drink together and went back to her place. By the following morning, things had more or less normalized.

In that same period of time, Fred and Frank had rediscovered the aperture in the object that Zalinski had found back at the Institute. It was now obvious that they were seeing the Bloop from an entirely different angle than was visible at the Institute. The hole looked like a real hole, that is, it had defined sides and appeared to be a three-dimensional opening, a fat oval about three by four feet. Objects could pass through it easily.

Audrey, who had finally overcome her skittishness enough to return to the office, had actually become curious enough to want to touch the object. She passed her arm through the hole and in pulling it back, lightly brushed the side. The space within the hole started to flicker, as if the lighting on the other side was changing rapidly. Fred walked around the other side and noted that the hole was no longer visible while Frank and Audrey made note of the fact that they couldn't see Fred through the hole in spite of the fact that the rest of the office was visible through it.

"It's another xenocontinuum! One very close to this one. The passageway created by the hole has been turned slightly out of kilter."

"Can we turn it more? Can we turn it enough to reach home?"

"I can scarcely believe it, but we might just be able to. We know that part of the object resides at the Institute."

"Another world." Said Audrey in a voice barely louder than a whisper. While Ajers and Johnston discussed how to proceed, she quietly stepped through the hole. From the other side she called back, "Look! I'm in another world!"

Fred and Frank turned to see her waving from the other side.

Fred said, "My God! Audrey, come back right now please!" He reached for her hand, but stumbled and his shoulder struck the side of the object. It had already started to move as he dove through the hole in an attempt to reach the woman.

Frank Johnston stood alone in the room. The space within the hole flickering quite quickly now, but slowing down as if a part of it had been set spinning by the impact of Fred's body. With some trepidation, he reached out to just barely penetrate the opening. He felt something brushing his fingers and the flickering slowed even more until he looked upon the landscape of what would be Cambridge, Massachusetts, had anyone bothered to build such a place. In the world he now saw, no one had. It was a virgin landscape. The vantage point was from about fifteen feet in the air, approximately where the office was positioned.

Frank tapped the side of the hole lightly. The image changed, he smiled broadly. He phoned for Chinese take out and then started tapping and pushing slightly to move the hole by tiny increments. This would take time. Two days later he stepped through into the Institute for Parallel Studies following an interview with Bob Zalinski to ascertain that this was the exact xenocontinuum he sought. He had never discovered Fred or Audrey during his search, and they found that the opening was far more unstable from the Institute's side and quickly closed.

Frank Johnston became famous for the story he wrote about his experiences in xenocontinuum X12-b and entered into a new career as a writer on science for the layman.

IX

Xenocontinuum X12-b^{2a}

Audrey saw Fred lurch toward her as he called out. Then the window in the air suddenly vanished. She felt dizzy and disoriented as she waved her hands through the air trying to find the hole in the universe, but it was totally gone. "I fucked up." She said to herself. The office was bare. Obviously it was between tenants. In the street the world appeared no different from the one

she had left. Fred didn't live at the place his phone number reached when she called home, it was her own voice she heard at the other end.

The other Audrey was surprisingly calm at being confronted with a previously unknown "twin sister". Audrey told her amazing story, the parts of it that she, herself could understand, that is. That she was even there at all, however, lent weight to what would otherwise seem to be nothing more than a tall tale.

She changed her name to Amy and she and the other Audrey started a new band that became rather successful. No one ever suspected that they were anything but sisters. They would never have had a reason to doubt it.

X

Xenocontinuum X102-a

Fred had wandered along the cobbled road for an hour or so before he was discovered. They were people, that was obvious enough, but not his species of people. They were huge and hairy, averaging about eight feet tall. They wore clothing and they spoke to him. Their speech conveyed no information as far as Fred was concerned, for theirs was a language unrelated to anything he had ever heard.

They were soon joined by another quasi-human of an entirely different type, three feet tall, eggplant black, and utterly hairless. He rode up on some sort of two-wheeled vehicle similar to a motorcycle. This one attempted to interrogate Fred, but quickly ascertained that their languages were mutually incomprehensible. The black dwarf's tongue almost didn't sound like a language, more like a string of sound effects, buzzes, clicks and ringing sounds permeated his speech. Fred doubted his mouth could even make those sounds.

He was taken into custody by the strange band. Within a few days he was hard at work on a farm that grew some kind of grain he was unfamiliar with. He was chained to a number of other people, none of whom were quite human. They were the property of the Kintellan genwhar of Fosmanteko as was Fred.

He toiled on that farm for ten years until he was shot dead in an escape attempt.

I resisted titling this "Return of the Red Fez!" Even so, that's what it is.

The Terror from Time

I
1100 b.c.

The hot midnight breeze made a wave through the reeds along the swollen Nile bank. The season would be fertile which was good news for the planners. The monument for the pharaoh might be finished late this season or early next providing that the slaves could be fed. If not, they would have to be sent to provincial farms and the work would be put off. In spite of the good harvest, forces were afoot to delay work on the great king's eternal house.

In a reed thatched hut by the bank, Khepernu was conferring with a tall Nubian. They were bargaining over a large portion of the crop which the Nubian proposed to trade gold and silver for. Khepernu, who was the soul authority over the disposal of the harvest knew that the portion would be missed by no one but the slaves.

For years he had been the pharaoh's warden of slaves, and for years, by stinting on their rations, he had accumulated the saved gold for his own tomb. The great pharaoh would never miss the small cost in time and Khepernu would be able to go to the land of the dead with more wealth than he had in life.

Most recently he had aquired an image of the jackal-headed god incribed with his personal dedication and it was this object that Shallah, the Nubian was admiring when he spoke.

"Ah, Khepernu, you shall greet your gods in the manner of a lord!" He said, "You shall sit at the table with your great kings!"

"True enough, Shallah." said the embezzling warden. "Great shall be my house in the Land of the Dead!"

"That is", said the Nubian, "if the pharaoh's accountants do not learn of your dealings and have your throat cut and your body quartered to feed the vultures." He chuckled at his own morbid wit as Khepernu frowned at him.

"That will never come to pass so long as you waste no more time and take your barges up river before dawn breaks!"

The Nubian merchant nodded his head holding onto his smile. "Fear not, my friend. You can walk with me to the dock now. I have nothing to gain by being untrue to our agreement."

With little more said, the two men stepped into the sultry night and walked to the dock where three barges loaded with good Egyptian grain waited. Atop the neatly piled sacks, the crew were amusing themselves with a game of *manacala* by torch light.

Engrossed in the ancient contest of stones and cups, the two men had barely noticed the gathering mist near the end of the dock until the man stepped from it. They stopped and stared in bewilderment.

The man was dressed in the manner of an aristocrat but had the physique of a warrior. His expressionless face had blank white eyes like those of a blind man although they clearly saw all. He wore a brilliant red head cloth.

"By Amun's breath, who are you?" cried Khepernu.

The voice of the man was like the prayer for the dead. He pointed directly at Khepernu and said, "You have taken that which belongs to your king and sought to mock the gods with your stolen riches. Foolish are you, Khepernu!"

The Nubian had frozen in his tracks open mouthed, the slave warden broke a sweat, the crewmen dropped the game stones and rose to their feet.

Nervously trying to hold his composure, Khepernu addressed the strange one who accused him. "You are confused friend and it is unseemly that you speak to the Pharaoh's warden of slaves thusly."

"End your lies, Khepernu, or you shall go to the Land of the Dead without your eyes or your tongue! Repent and repay and you can end your days as an honorable slave."

The Nubian reached for his sword and the blank eyed man snapped his fingers. A bolt of silent lightning leapt from his hand striking the sword arm of the dusky merchant. where once a hand held a weapon was only a smoking stump ending just below the elbow. The Nubian fell to his knees wailing in pain as his crew scattered up the dock into the night. Khepernu was rooted to the spot in abject terror.

The demon man spoke again. "You cannot fare well against me, Khepernu! I am he who is the soldier of righteousness. I am he who protects the interests of Amun! I am He who Laughs at Midnight!" and with those words a haunting mirthless laugh broke from his lips.

Khepernu thought one second too late to run. He started to turn as the man once more snapped his fingers. Flame erupted from his face where once was his left eye. His scream was cut short as flames similarly issued from his mouth and finally his other eye.

As his life drained from him he heard the voice of the man saying "Your soul shall know no rest in the palace of the dead! You shall serve below the most depraved to walk among men!"

The last Khepernu heard in life was the eerie laughter of the white eyed man.

II

1932 a.d.

Professor Grant Gibson knew well the meaning of the glyphs on the crumbling scrap of papyrus. He almost felt as if he had experienced the event it described himself. Indeed, in a way, a part of him had. The mullah Ibrahim had placed within him the spirit which laughs at midnight and now used him as the agent of righteousness.

The papyrus had come to light only a month ago in a tiny shop in Cairo where it was purchased for the Teabury Museum, attached to City University, where Gibson was curator.

Daily, he paced the halls which housed the dust covered memories of mankind. His life was one of contemplation of the ages and sorting the detritus of history. His upbringing in the lands of deserts and pyramids by archaeologist parents had thus predestined his life.

What made him different from his parents was the closeness to the natives of that land and a feeling for its culture that his parents could never feel in the same way. Not only did he learn as a child to read the sacred glyphs in the ancient pagan temples, but he also grew in wisdom at the feet of the Mohammeden holy men. His American parents saw to it that he did not forget where he was from and that he paid homage to the proper Christian God, but young Grant did not see Christian civilization until he was in his young manhood.

Now, he too had become a professor of archaeology and a noted author on the subject of Islamic culture. His expertise, however, extended to the roots of human thought in all lands and was regularly sought out by the more inquisitive students of the university.

Annie Rhodes, Gibson's secretary, came into his office to inform him that one such student now needed his assistance which turned out to be a minor question regarding an upcoming exam.

Miss Rhodes had not always inhabited the halls of knowledge. Only a few months before she had been well known to the men who frequent burlesque houses as a performer of great natural charms and no small amount of talent. In those times she had held onto enough of her integrity for her to stand out among her peers as something special. Her fresh faced blonde beauty turned heads everywhere she went even now, but in her new life she did not have to

suffer the attentions of the underworld. She had unwittingly become the pawn of wicked forces within the city and come close to losing her life. It was only through the actions of the entity known in the city as the "Red Fez" that she had been given a second chance to make her way in the world.

She knew that this mysterious being somehow dwelt within the soul of professor Gibson but they were not precisely one in the same person. Since she had entered his life she had seen the transformation several times and it was clear to her that something much more subtle than the mere donning of a disguise transpired in these moments.

He had become, with his silent assistant Mahmoud, a common but unwelcome visitor to the haunts of the city's less savory denizens. The police had all but given up trying to question him and had in fact turned a blind eye to his activities, but the mayor and the city council had become troubled by the increase in gangland infighting which threatened to involve innocent citizens. Recently the balance of power in the underworld had been seriously undermined by the strange death of the "Maestro" who had been the city's most powerful mob boss. He had also been the most influential legitimate businessman in the area and his death left much unsettled. Since that event violence had spiraled upward as the remaining underworld figures struggled over the Maestro's former enterprises.

The dapper man of mystery in the fez with the silent .45 had struck terror into the hearts of those who wallow in the mire of crime. Not terror enough, however, to put an end to it in the city. His was a battle to be joined anew each night. Down the dusty corridors of history the mission of He who Laughs at Midnight has been never-ending.

The contents of the papyrus had alerted Gibson to a disturbing vibration which had of late permeated the underworld of the city. This vibration had surrounded anything which a certain Howard "the Rock" Stein had anything to do with.

III

The Rock

The music in the speakeasy was loud, sensuous and brassy. The dancers, driven by disregard for society's judgment and bootleg liquor, gave in to the lowest of human motivations. Dice rolled and cards were dealt and tossed aside as the hard earned money of once good men found its way into the pockets of greed and wickedness. What once had been destined to become milk for a child was now exchanged for a ball of opium, a chance on the fall

of a card or the flesh of a formerly innocent girl. All of this money built up the power of the man known to both his friends and his enemies as "The Rock".

Howard Stein had sprouted like a rank weed from the gambling, fighting and whoring of the city's docks and back alleys. As long as the Maestro had held sway he remained small change, a mere tool of those who were the real power. With the passing of the Maestro, others had risen to fill the gap in power, for the city is a jungle where the opportunists rule and only the predators get respect.

Stein was just such a predator. The small, the meek and the peace loving were taken under his control or destroyed in the attempt.

"The Rock" did not work his evil alone. He had brought from the depths with him the most faithful of lieutenants.

Cyrus Osbourne had been a guttersnipe who had done jobs for crooks and gamblers for a spare nickel here and there. Always shut out from the world that he just touched the underside of but pleased enough to be allowed to warm himself by its tainted fire.

Stein had seen a chance to bind this hungry lad to his side as a human shield. He gave him a job as a personal body guard, paying him enough to clothe him in fine suits and put gold rings on his fingers. This he did and more. His aspect was not so much that of a well turned out man of the modern world as that of some dandy from the nineteenth century. Osbourne wasn't stupid. He knew on which side his bread was buttered and protected Stein with a rare ferocity. He had without a second's thought shot dead several men who had dared to disagree with "The Rock". His collecting the fingers of his victims was a perverse and disgusting practice which Stein encouraged and publicized. Anyone who knew him, knew that Osbourne's sanity sat upon a knife edge, and that was one of Stein's greatest weapons.

This evening, the Rock sat at his reserved table talking with Ernie Clark, who ran the club for him. Osbourne sat off to the side, filing his nails in boredom.

"The money is not up to par, Ernie." Said the Rock.

"I know, mister Stein," said Ernie, "the truck we had commin' over the border with fine wines and liquor was stopped by the 'Red Fez', so's all we got is bathtub gin. Ya can get that at any joint in town."

"The Red Fez." The Rock growled. "I owe him a debt of gratitude for getting the Maestro out of my way, but he has to stop now."

"Or be stopped." Put in Osbourne, darkly.

"Indeed, Cyrus", said the Rock, "or be stopped."

IV Brooks

Chief Brooks sat at his desk chewing on the sodden stump of an unlit cigar. His face was marked by a deep scowl. The scowl of John Chandler Brooks was well known to the entire city. His subordinates had taken to referring to him sardonically as "Jolly John", although none would have dared to to his face or even within earshot.

The scowl was the result of having just finished speaking with the mayor on the phone. His Honor had made sure that he pointed out how much of the police force's job had recently been done by the so-called "Red Fez".

None of the cops had ever actually laid eyes on the dapper ghost who laughs, but over thirty criminals who had been left to their custody had spoken of him in terms of anxiety and deepest dread. Several complete confessions were obtained simply by the implication that failure to do so would result in their being placed back in his hands.

The chief rose from his desk and called out "Sullivan!"

A uniformed sergeant dashed in. "What's up chief?"

Seamus "Jimmy" Sullivan had recently been given the "promotion" from night desk to the chief's personal assistant. Since the Red Fez had appeared on the scene, Sullivan had awakened Brooks in the night repeatedly with bizarre reports of his doings until the chief got the inspiration to promote him to the day shift. The current night desk knew to call Sullivan, not the chief.

"I am discontent, Sully. Since the passing of the Maestro, the city has become a madhouse. We don't know who's doing what and the cherry on the sundae is how the Red Fez is making a monkey out of all of us."

"I guess you got that right chief. All of the pimps and bootleggers, the gunsels and the roughnecks would rather deal with us than him."

"As much as he is making it hot for all the right people, we still can't let him stay on the street. I need to talk to the Red Fez, Sully. I want you to go get him."

Sullivan's face went ashen. "You want me to *arrest* the Red Fez?!?"

"Only if he doesn't come when you ask politely."

□□□□ The sergeant made a sour face. "Chief, if I have done anything to make you mad, I'm sorry! If you want to bust me back to walking a beat...."

"Shaddup, Sully. His Honor the Mayor has asked that I, uh-uh, make that *insisted* that I put my best man on the case of contacting the Red Fez and, Lord help us, *you* are our best man."

"Hey! I got a wife and kids!"

"Could be worse, Sullivan. You could have *my* wife and kids."

V

Osbourne

In the dank alley, the young man fled past sodden boxes and brawling tom cats. He clutched the bag close as he cast his eyes about for those who would follow.

Two thousand dollars. Enough to set up a new and better life out from under the foul life which he had drifted into.

The risk he had taken was foolish and potentially fatal. He had been charged with the task of running the Rock's receipts and had instead decided to keep the bag for himself and leave town with his ailing mother. The problem was that his nervous demeanor had been noted as he left. Now he had a real problem.

Panting as he rounded a shed, he was brought up short by the sight of a man standing in the shadows. The only part of the figure that was lit were the polished shoes and the cuffs of the pin striped trousers. The figure was revealed as he stepped into full illumination.

"Hello, Benny." He said.

Benny tried to hold his composure. He knew that keeping up the front was everything. "E-Evening Mister Osbourne, dis is kinda a funny place for you to be."

Osbourne, his sharp features brought into harsh relief by a distant street lamp, studied his manicured nails intently. "I might well say the same for you, Benny. It looks to me like you are heading in the exact opposite direction of where you should be heading. Mister Stein's house is the other way."

"I hadda go home first and make sure Ma was all right." He tried to smile at Cyrus Osbourne, but even under the best of circumstances, his was a difficult countenance to smile upon.

"It gratifies the heart to see a young man so devoted to his mother. The shame of it all is that she will be crying because of you tomorrow."

"Whaddaya mean?!? Aw no Mister Osbourne! I'll bring back the dough!" Benny's face had gone white with panic.

Osbourne withdrew a small revolver from the breast of his suit and pointed it at the heart of the young man. "No need to worry about that, Benny, I'll

return the money for you." The soft tone used by Osbourne were offset by the flat report of the pistol.

The well dressed man prodded the fresh corpse with the toe of his shoe to spread out its jacket. He knelt upon the dead man's jacket protecting the expensive material of his suit from being soiled as he used a folding knife to remove two fingers from the right hand of his victim. He wiped the blood from the blade upon the young man's shirt from which he then cut a piece of fabric to wrap his gristly prize.

In the hour that followed, Osbourne reported Benny's indiscretion and punishment to Stein and then retired to his own apartment in a building on the same block as Stein's.

Stein had been incensed. The men he worked with were *criminals* after all. If he bumped off every bum who lifted a few c-notes from the till, he wouldn't have an operation left. He instinctively knew that he should save his wrath for guys who were after bigger things. He told Osbourne to consult him in the future and then had sent him home for the night.

The decoration of Osbourne's apartment reflected strange tastes. The walls were painted and even light tan color and had no pictures. The furnishings were Spartan and tasteful but lacking in warmth. The only thing which might be seen as non-functional in the main room was a two foot tall statue of polished granite depicting a dog headed man standing on an oblong base inscribed with Egyptian hieroglyphics.

The sharp faced man withdrew the amputated digits from his pocket. He hadn't really cared about Benny's thievery except that it engendered something he needed.

Cyrus Osbourne laid the bloodied cloth wrap before the ancient idol and spoke softly in a dead language.

Had there been anyone else in the room they would have seen none of what followed save for Osbourne speaking to some invisible listener.

Around the idol formed the ghostly image of a mutilated face, lips scared and drawn back to a froze, mirthless grin. Eyes absent with the loose lids a raw and livid red with even more horrid scaring all around. The image wore an Egyptian head cloth which was ragged and charred around the edges.

"Khepernu", said Osbourne softly, "I have brought you fingers from the hand of a thief. Take them that you may instruct me!"

The cloth unfolded revealing the bloody trophies taken by Osbourne. They rose into the air and as they rose they seemed to distort in shape and color forming from a pair of fingers into a single tongue. The tongue turned wetly

in the air before it wriggled between the jaws of the floating flayed countenance.

Now, for the first time, the face spoke. "You serve me well, Cyrus. Again you bring me the means to speak which was taken from me by the laughing one. I have claimed your soul as my weapon against him, for again he walks the Earth. He who laughs at midnight."

"How will I know him, Master?"

"I see him in your mind. He is now known as the Red Fez. You, Cyrus, must eliminate him. If you do so, I shall again walk the Earth and see and speak."

"And then, Master?"

"And then I shall rule in a palace of gold."

"In a palace of gold, master."

VI

He Who Laughs

It was on a corner in a tenement neighborhood and was a little piece of home to the immigrants who had come to build new lives in the City. That it served strong drink to its patrons made it a speakeasy so far as the letter of the law was concerned, but the authorities had done little more than issue warnings because it was a cornerstone of their community. Until now, the establishment had attracted no interest from the warring gangs of bootleggers and the broader spectrum of immorality that they brought with them.

This evening the normally happy patrons who would be joking and discussing the events of the day over a pint of ale had abandoned their darts and skittles to gather against a far wall at gun point. One man held a Thompson gun on the crowd against the wall while another threatened the barman.

"Pay attention, Paddy!", he barked at the man, "the Rock sends his greetings! You don't run a business like this unless its part of his operation."

The publican was no hero and was visibly shivering in fear was able to stutter out a few words. "W-what do y-you want of m-me?"

"The Rock has to get eighty percent. No less."

"M-my family!"

"Yer family will have to make do with navy beans! Pay up or lose the works!"

As the conversation progressed, some of the cornered customers noticed that a shadow seemed to have animated and taken human form in the darkness outside. It was hard to follow for them. Something seemed to compel them to ignore the movement no matter how obvious it became. They were sure that a man had stepped through the door and yet also knew that they should neither see nor hear him. Suddenly, he was just there, behind the gunmen with a drawn .45.

A voice which seemed to come from a great distance spoke. "The wickedness must end." He said simply.

The dusky skinned man was masked and wore a dinner jacket and a pristine Red Fez. Save for the disturbing blank white eyes, he looked like he might have been a waiter at some sort of novelty party on the west side.

The man holding the owner turned with a start. "Wot d'hell are you?!?" He demanded as he leveled the chatter gun at the interlopers abdomen. The other gunman craned his neck to see what was going on while still trying to cover his charges.

The mystery man ignored the gun. "You know me. I live in the land outside your sight. I am an inhabitant of your fears and anxieties. I am he who chips at the stone heart of wickedness. I am he who laughs at midnight." The soliloquy had a sing-song hypnotic tone and the gunmen almost found their attention wavering.

"You're the Red Fez!"

"You may call me what you please, but my name should not concern you so much as the fate that awaits the agents of evil."

The second thug said, "Just blast him, Joey!" and the first man fired, letting loose a enough bullets to cut the stranger neatly in half. but somehow it was his own accomplice who now lay gruesomely dead and torn asunder on the floor. The Red Fez was nowhere to be seen, then he was standing on the bar although no one had seen him leap from the floor.

He looked over at the cowering customers. "Leave." He said. Briefly, they were a struggling knot in the doorway and then they were gone.

The First gunman was off balance. He was having a hard time concentrating. He knew that he would end up dead if he couldn't pay attention. He shook his head to clear it and a hand grabbed the back of his jacket. He was being run at the wall which he struck hard.

The hand turned him around and slammed him into the wall again roughly. He found himself looking into a pair of ghostly, dead white eyes.

The Red Fez spoke softly. "Tell Stein that I am near, but also tell him that something ancient and terrible is even nearer." He signaled to a silent turbaned man who had appeared in the doorway and the scene became again confusing for the mobster. A mirthless laugh seemed to come from every direction and slowly faded into the now timeless evening.

The Tommy gun was in the hands of the barman, The Red Fez was gone. Several minutes had passed when the cop rushed in.

Sullivan saw the machine gun torn body lying on the floor and the barman holding the other. He stared in mingled horror and wonder.

"Uncle Mike! Thank the good Lord you're o.k.!"

The barman sagged as Sullivan cuffed the other man who was still in some sort of stupor. "Ah, Jimmy. You're a sight for sore eyes, me boy. These gents meant business, and that was for sure. I was fair certain to meet Jaysus had it not been for the stranger."

"I heard. We got a call at the station from one of patrons who got out. It was the Red Fez, wasn't it."

"I don't know what to call him. Angel or demon he might have been, but not a man."

VII

Preparations

Annie Rhodes watched in fascination as Mahmoud worked on the motor of the Hispano-Suiza. She waited in vain for him to get even a single spot of grease on his immaculate white jacket. It never happened. The Arab treated the auto like a sacred object and his every move with it seemed like a ceremony from some strange religion with the car as its idol.

Professor Gibson had told him that the car must receive a thorough tune up, which, of course, it didn't need due to Mahmoud's constant attentions, but he had to be sure. Times were strange and it would be foolish to allow himself, in an inauspicious moment, to be thwarted by a clogged line or a dirty valve.

"You treat that auto like a precious child." She said.

Mahmoud looked up from his labors and smiled broadly showing dazzling white teeth. It was the most response she could expect from the man, for he was mute as the sphinx of his native land.

Grant Gibson entered the garage and said. "It looks wonderful Mahmoud." The expression of satisfaction he wore was the closest thing to a smile he would ever show on most occasions.

The turbaned man in white tightened a final nut and closed the bonnet. Sliding behind the wheel, he brought the engine to life. It made only a soft sound that yet conveyed great power. Annie had once heard a tiger purr and it reminded her of that sound.

"It sounds even better. Excellent work my friend."

Again the Arab smiled broadly.

Gibson then spoke to Annie. "I will have work tonight. There is something unspeakable out there, something beyond mere violation of the laws of men. I fear for the very souls of anyone it touches."

The lithe blonde shuddered involuntarily. What could he possibly be referring to? She knew well and personally the evils of the criminal underworld, but what the professor hinted at seemed to reach beyond that.

She feared for her employer, savior and friend. It was already more than she might have hoped for to be able to call him that much and she still dared to hope for more. How hard it was for a healthy girl to work so closely with a man of such drive and power who, despite her hints and subtle flirtations, all but ignored the fact that she was a woman at all!

Gibson stared into space and for a brief instant his eyes drained of color and then were restored to normalcy. "The moment is near." he said.

VIII

A Laugh in the Dark

Threatening clouds obscured the waxing Moon. There would be a storm before the night was done. The living vessel of the laughing spirit of judgment stood alone on a rooftop exercising senses unknown to lesser men. A name, a place, an evil intent became clear to his mind. He lifted the fez for a moment to just smooth his hair and then, replaced it. The Cairo Club was a few buildings over, but he had felt it was best not to use the front door.

He leapt into the space between buildings, oblivious to the eight story drop to the alley below and alighted with seeming lack of effort on the neighboring roof. Four more similarly death defying crossings brought him to the building he sought.

He heard below his feet a soft rhythmic sound, like heart beat of a sleeping titan. Entering the stairway, the Red Fez heard the sound to resolve into the sounding of drums and the rattle of systrums. The ancient spirit within him recognized the music as a portion of an Egyptian transition ritual.

He rushed down flight after flight until he spied around a corner, an unexpected sight.

Before the big double doors inside the establishment stood two men who the Red Fez recognized as "muscle" for Stein's organization, men hired more for their sheer mass and threatening demeanor rather than for brains or particular ability. It appeared that their lack of brain power had served someone well, for these fellows were clearly in some sort of trance. Even more strangely, they had shed their street clothes in favor of a rather poor simulation of Egyptian style skirts and head cloths obviously straight out of the club's wardrobe room. They stood at attention with arms folded staring directly ahead.

The masked soldier of righteousness risked stepping into clear view.

The reaction from the mesmerized henchmen was instantaneous. From their belts they withdrew swords and advanced on the Red Fez. The mystery man responded by producing his gun. He knew that these men were but the beginning of the test he would face this night and that he ought to merely shoot them. He was kept from this course of action by a sense of compassion. These guards were little more than dumb animals when they had command of their senses and were now acting as nothing more than automatons in the service of a greater evil. He put away his weapon as quickly as he had drawn it and vanished from the view of the advancing goons.

A slight tweak of their hypnotic suggestion kept them from seeing the Red Fez at all, but it would only work for a short time, for the farther removed from higher cognizance a person is, the less his mind can be diverted by the force of mind itself. The sharper and more organized a mind is, the more information is in it to be redirected. In an astute mind, the Red Fez could create complicated illusions, but in a more muddled intelligence, he could only control what is able to be noticed or the perception of the passage of time.

The Red Fez slipped through the door while the guards stood scratching their nigh empty craniums in confusion. A few short moments later a human stampede of jazz musicians and mostly nude burlesque dancers piled out of those same doors knocking over the stupefied goons. A cry from behind the doors shook them out of their inaction and they both stepped inside the club.

Seconds later, one of them dragged the other, bleeding, back through the doors.

The Red Fez clutching a bloodied shoulder and illuminated by the flicker of flames emerged from within. Even so, the strange laughter which was his trademark of grim triumph still came forth as he made his way to the street to enter a large green car which sped away with a turbaned dusky skinned man at the wheel. The final person to step forth was a dazed looking man with a trumpet in his hand and an Egyptian style head dress on his head.

Lieutenant Sullivan was running toward the building with several uniformed officers panting behind when he heard the laugh in the darkness and knew what it meant. Before he could organize his men to pursue the sound his attention was drawn by the flames now leaping from the windows of the club.

He would have to get his man another night.

The building was saved from being consumed completely by a sudden storm which had started wetting down the flames even before the fire squad arrived.

IX

Rumpus

Elwood "Rumpus" Monroe was telling the tale yet again, this time to chief Brooks himself.

"Man...I hafta go through this again?" He mopped sweat from his brown forehead. "All I want to do is get me some sleep and try to forget about this whole thing!"

The Chief was not long on patience, he had, in spite of dire warnings, been yet again roused from a sound sleep by Sullivan. He leaned very close to the sweating jazzman.

"Listen up pal. All you have to do is make this statement and then you can go home, so just shake the reefer out of your head and start talking, alright my friend?"

Rumpus curled his lip at the chief, but he realized that he wasn't going anywhere for a while and started talking.

"Me an' my boys had been hired on to play for the girlie show at the Cairo Club 'cross town. I guess that the owner had a beef with the Rock 'cause one of his main men, Osbourne, I think his name was, came in before opening and got real tough with him. The guy, Osbourne, Hollered at us to play loud

and keep on playin' 'til he said quit it. He took the owner into the office. We played loud enough but I still heard his gun when it went off. When he came out of the office, he had a bloody hankerchief in his hand. The two big mugs looked a little green, so I guess it musta' been ugly in there.

"This guy had a real wild look, like he was hopped up on something, but it wasn't dope, I've seen that and this wasn't it.

"Now I was worrying that me an' the boys weren't going home with any scratch tonight, and even a little worried that we might not go home at all when the guy comes over and tells us and the girls as well that the club was going to have a private party tonight. He handed out the cash right then and there. I would have thought we were playing for the King of England for what he paid us. We had to work for it though...hadda wear these sort of Egyptian get ups, The girls too, only a lot less of it, if ya know what I mean."

"I get the picture." Said Brooks. When the girls had been rounded up they had been just a scrap of cloth short of totally nude. "That's not so strange, though. All the performers at the Cairo dress Egyptian." It was a place that the cops had been prepairing to raid sometime in the next week.

"Anyways", Continued Rumpus, "I was booked to play the horn, and if doing it in a funny outfit was what it took to make my bread, well...I've done stranger stuff and for less money." Rumpus flashed a wry pearly grin.

"We knew that this guy wasn't playing with a full deck, ya know, a full fledged graduate of the laughing academy, so we didn't wanna make a fuss. We jus' went along and did what he said. This joker, Osbourne, he set this statue on one of the tables. Looked like a guy with a dog's head and then he gets himself up all Egyptian too as well as his two strong arms who he sends outside. He puts candles all over the room so's there's shadows jumping every which way.

"He says he wants to hear something real *African*, ya'know, like the stuff we can only play in the colored clubs in Harlem, real rough an' lowdown."

Brooks was getting impatient. "Do I look like a music critic? Get on with it!"

"I'm gettin' on, man, jus' let me tell it." Again, Monroe attended to his copious perspiration. "So anyways he pulls out that handkerchief again and unfolds it in front of the statue. Its got a couple o' *fingers* in it, man! It was nasty! Well he gets the girls to start rubbing him up with oil, an' I'm just thinkin' that this is all part of some game he likes to play with the ladies, but it ain't even *that* regular, man. He starts dancin' around and speaking in some foreign language, maybe Egyptian, I wouldn't know. Ya wanna know

something strange, though...I could almost understand it, and the more I heard, the more I understood."

"What did you understand?" Asked the chief.

"It was real weird...somethin' like 'The flesh of this servant is my gift to wise and ancient Khepernu! Thou may enter at thine own will that I may become thy vessel! The laughing spirit will be vanquished, this I promise thee!', an' that's when the guy in the mask came to bust up the party."

"The guy in the mask."

"Yeah, the guy in the mask.... with the white eyes....the Red Fez. The one you was looking for when you picked me up. Osbourne didn't even turn around, he jus' laid it out in a real spooky voice, 'It is He Who Laughs at Midnight who comes among us! It is he who has mocked us, who has thwarted us! Let me destroy him! Let me show him who is really the strongest!'."

Monroe proved to be a mimic of considerable powers and his recitation of the words sent a chill through the chief.

"Well, the guy in the mask answers right back. His voice sounds like it comes from somewhere real far away, like he's not even really there, 'Foolish one. You made the wrong decision when you defied the old gods and their pharaoh on Earth! You make a worse error when you defy the agent of Allah who controls the laughing spirit! Khepernu, the punishment for your defiance shall know no end!' And then he let out with this laugh, but there weren't nuthin' funny 'bout this laugh! Man, I knew we were into something *way* out of the ordinary here!"

The chief puffed on his cigar and tried to look bored.

"We heard that laugh and, man, we just stopped the music! Osbourne got mad, man! He got right down and shouted right in my face 'Play on, damn you! The music must not cease!'. I couldn't. I was too scared, man! He pulled a revolver out of his belt and put it right between my eyes and shouted 'PLAY!'. Man, I tried. I really tried but I could only blow some lame squeek, and that crazy man pulled the trigger! I heard the bang real close to my head, but I wasn't wearin' wings so I knew he had missed. The Red Fez had shot the gun out of his hand at the same time he fired, but his gun didn't make no noise!

"I'm tellin' you, I decided then and there that I wasn't gonna play outside of Harlem again. The downtown gigs just ain't worth it, man!

"Somthin' real weird was happening. Osbourne's eyes were going white just like the Red fez guy's. This was a lot more than jus' some wild party!

"Then the Red Fez took a shot at the statue. Blew that little dog head right off it! I thought Osbourne's head was going to pop like a balloon! He started

screaming and shooting at the Red Fez, but he wasn't bein' where Osbourne was shootin'. The Fez was on a table hollerin' for everyone to get out. My boys, the girls, they were gone, but it was like I grew roots or something. I just stood there lookin' silly holdin' my horn.

"As they was pilin' *out* the two big guys were tryin' to pile *in*. Osbourne was pointing at the Red Fez and yellin' for them to kill him. They both looked kinda stupid and they didn't seem to see the Fez even though he was standing right there. One of them finally pulled out a gun and shot the other one in the leg. It was as if he thought he saw the Red Fez there instead of who it was.

"Osbourne went crazy. He told the two big monkeys to get out and one dragged the other out the doors.

"He was hollering at the Red Fez, 'You will not twice thwart me! I am the vessel of a spirit as strong as the one which dwells in you!'

"That boy, the Red fez I mean, he laughed again but there still weren't nothing funny! 'I am an agent of light, a servant of Allah! The petty wickedness which drives you dies in the light. You are doomed, Khepernu, as is your abused and corrupted vessel.'" Monroe paused a second. "He kept callin' him that name....Khepernu."

"Osbourne shot him. I thought it was right through the heart at first, but he only went down to his knee. When he got up he was holding his shoulder. Just for a second, his eyes looked regular, but they turned white again as he stood up straight.

Brooks rolled his eyes. "He can change the color of his eyes....I've never heard such malarkey!"

Monroe stared steadily at the chief. "You can call it what you want, mister *police* man. I saw what I saw. Now let me tell it.

"The rest happened so quick that I would have missed it if I had blinked.

"The Red Fez fired his gun. It didn't make no noise, like I said before. Maybe just a little 'pop' sound.

"The bullet hit one of the candles and tossed it onto the little Egyptian skirt that Osbourne was wearing. I guess that with all of the oil he had on him it was like the wick of a lamp and he lit right up. It only took a second or so for the flames to crawl all over him.

"The Fez just stood there and was talking. 'It is the fire of Allah which cleanses your wickedness. It is the retribution of Heaven that commits you to the flames!' and then he started that crazy laughing again as he ran out.

"Osbourne looked like he was just made out of fire and was screaming his head off. He stumbled around setting everything he touched on fire. He finally fell over and everything was starting to go up in flames.

"That's when my feet finally decided to start working and I got the hell out of there! I guess I was a little confused when you cops picked me up."

The chief was shaking his head. He couldn't believe that his only witness was this obviously hop-headed horn player.

"G'wan home, Rumpus, but don't leave town."

The jazzman's broad brown face lit up. "Good. Now I can go get me some sleep!" He jumped up from the chair and was out the door in a trice.

"More than I'll get, no doubt." Said the chief. The entire business gave him the creeps.

IX

Fragments

The uniformed cop placed the cardboard box on Grant Gibson's desk.

"The university president said that you were the guy to see to get this identified, professor."

Gibson gingerly removed seven granite fragments from the box and laid them out in more or less their proper positions on the desk blotter. He could see that the broken faces were new but they also showed some blackening from smoke.

"It's not a major find, but it's interesting from the standpoint of Egyptian culture."

"It's Egyptian?"

"Yes. It's from a personal shrine. One that was used by a minor bureaucrat. This particular fellow was in charge of the Pharaoh's slaves. Look here on the base though. His name has been scratched out. That was a punishment, eradication from history."

"I wonder what he did?"

"We'll never know."

The policeman left with his pittance of information. As he left the building, he thought he heard the echo of strange laughter.

Sometimes, when I am drifting between wakefulness and sleep, my brain tells me myths from cultures that never existed. I have tons of these. If I was sitting by a campfire with a bunch of guys in skins and war paint, I could keep them entertained for hours.

Two Moons Dreaming

When the world was a fresh new place, only one tribe walked the Earth. They were the ancestors of all people of all tribes and nations and it was they who discovered all the ways of man.

To a woman named Lomi was born a man child who was fast asleep. He neither moved nor cried but only slept peacefully for two complete passages of the moon. On the first day of the third month he woke and cried so loudly that the Earth shook. Lomi named him Two Moons Dreaming.

He grew up to be a very powerful shaman. Two Moons Dreaming knew all of the spirits and all of their ways. He could call the spirit of rain when crops grew dry and he could call the spirit of the wind when the days grew hot.

His wisdom was great and deep and he instructed the children in the ways of the world and the tricks of the spirits.

The Moon was the protector of Two Moons Dreaming and he was her voice in the world. She came to him and lamented that she had born no children. She asked Two Moons Dreaming to help her become the wife of the Sun.

In those days the Sun was a wild spirit who moved about the sky without predictable time. He would come and walk the Earth and the mountains and forests would burst into flames. He lived in the great house in the sky where he fed the fire of heaven with wood that he took from the forests of the east each morning.

Two Moons Dreaming told the Moon that the Sun would have no woman to tell him when to hunt and when to chop wood.

"He, like I, is lonely in the sky. We have each our own realm and our own ways but we are both alone." Spoke the Moon. "He desires my embrace even if he is presently unaware of the desire."

The Moon gave to Two Moons Dreaming three spirits to assist him. They were the wise and wily Rabbit-Bird, the sizeless Dancing Ghost and the Rock Shadow who lived in the dark places of the world. The Rabbit bird knew where the Sun's most favored hunting ground was, the Dancing ghost

knew where the Sun made his camp each night and the Rock Shadow knew the Sun's most secret desire.

Two Moons Dreaming and the three spirits set off for the Sun's house in the sky. They found the door of the Sun's house guarded by two golden bears who growled fiercely and took swipes with their great claws at Two Moons Dreaming. But Two Moons Dreaming knew the ways of all the beasts and he whispered to the bears. He told them of the salmon who leapt from the mountain waters of the west and how they would never go hungry on the scraps from the Sun's table if they were to go there to fish. Upon hearing that, the bears left their place at the Sun's door and went to the western mountains to fish. Two Moons Dreaming entered the house of the Sun.

The sun was by his fire surrounded by his many faithful hounds. Two Moons Dreaming came to him and said to him, "The beautiful lady, the Moon wants to feel your embrace and to bear you sons and daughters."

The Sun leapt up and his hounds bayed and barked. "She seeks to make of me a woman myself", he raged, "she wants to control when I hunt and when I rest!"

"You are the Lord of the great house of the sky", said Two Moons Dreaming, "but no man is the true head of a household without a wife to make the meals and watch the fire. You cannot hunt enough because you must always feed the fire. Because no woman minds your house you know not the hour to rise or the hour to sleep. You are filled with disquiet because you feel not a woman's soft touch."

The Sun danced and raged about the great hall of his house. The dogs chased and barked.

He turned upon Two Moons Dreaming and said, "I shall make a bargain with you, we shall play a game and if you win, I will become the husband of your lady."

Two Moons Dreaming agreed and the Sun said to him, "You must answer three questions. If you are a truly great shaman you will know the answers."

The sun asked "Where is my most favored hunting ground?"

The Rabbit-Bird fluttered about the head of Two Moons Dreaming and chattered in his secret tongue.

Two Moons Dreaming said "You hunt in the northern mountains of the land of smoke."

The Sun was amazed and screamed in rage and danced about the hall in frustration.

Again he asked Two Moons Dreaming a question. "Where do I make my camp each night?"

The Dancing Ghost danced in a circle around Two Moons Dreaming and told him with his dance the Sun's second secret.

"You camp in the western lands beyond the great sea."

The Sun cried out and danced about the hall as the Dancing Ghost danced with him in mockery.

"Two Moons Dreaming", spoke the Sun, "you shall not know the answer to my final question. Tell me, shaman, what is my most secret desire?"

The Rock Shadow crept through the cracks in the stones of the great house. With creaks and groans it told Two Moons Dreaming what he needed to know.

"Your most secret desire is to lie with the Moon and put a child in her."

The Sun started to cry out that Two Moons Dreaming was wrong when it came to him that he had spoken the truth. He spoke now quietly to Two Moons Dreaming. "Bring the lady Moon into my house to sit before my fire."

And so Two Moons Dreaming Brought the Moon into the great house of the sky. Men upon the Earth saw the moon come to cover the Sun in the day and bring darkness on the land and in the darkness was born a new light, tiny and twinkling. After this day the Sun would come and go with regularity and his house was kept well. Sometimes the Moon would visit her husband and cover him in the day and each time she would bear a new light. These lights, the stars, are the eggs of the Moon and will bring forth her children on the last day of the world.

Donna Abbate is a wonderful artist. She also happens to be a close friend. Once upon a time we did a book together in which she drew pictures and I wrote stories based on those illustrations. It was fun and I wanted to do it again. This time I wanted to write a novelette and have her illustrate it. We both came up short of time and the project was never completed and likely never will be. This is about half of the planned novelette and only three of the illustrations.

Our story begins in a world where things had gone differently for Columbus. Things had gone much more as he had planned.

Ocean Sea

The First Crossing

It had taken Columbus years to sell his mission to the Spanish King and Queen. He was utterly certain that he could reach the Spice Islands more quickly by going west crossing the Ocean Sea rather than circumnavigate Africa.

Having gotten approval and money after ten years of negotiation and political intrigue, he was finally able to assemble a fleet of three small ships. Two, the *Nina* and the *Pinta* were caravels, while the flagship *Santa Maria* was a tub-like nao. The total crew of the fleet numbered one hundred and four.

On September sixth, 1492, he sailed west from the Canary Islands into uncharted waters anticipating a trip of some twenty to forty days. On October fifteenth, some of the crew, having seen no land for all that time came to fear that they were going to sail off the edge of the Earth. Driven by their superstition, they mutinied and took over one of the ships, the *Pinta*, and turned it around to return to Spain where it arrived on the twenty-fifth of November. Most of the crew were hanged.

The two remaining ships carried on finally arriving at the Isles of Hawai'i on December first. Many of the remaining crew had died during the voyage, including Vincente Yanez, former captain of the *Pinta*. The natives of those islands were friendly enough to help the crews of the two ships and provided them with shelter and food while they restocked the larders, rested and attempted to hire a few natives to replace deceased crew members. The Hawai'ians, it turned out, were fine natural sailors and knew the waters which lay ahead of the two ships well.

On March forth, 1493, the *Nina* and the *Santa Maria* set sail from Hawai'i for the Spice Islands and sailed into the harbor at Batavia on the second of May, having made one brief landfall at Nagasaki in Cipango on the way.

Ironically, the trip to the Indies had taken quite a bit longer than the African route so after a short stay at Batavia, where they took on some cargo, and set off for Spain around the horn of Africa.

On August first, Columbus returned to Spain becoming the first to circumnavigate the globe.

Word of the trip reached the finest mind of the era, that of Leonardo DaVinci. The old maestro was confused that the sea was so vast. "The world is out of balance", he wrote in his notebook, "half of the earth without any great land. Can the Earth be the true dominion of mankind when it is more than half sea?"

The Western Trade Route was infrequently used after the voyage of Columbus. It was an unreasonably arduous voyage for the ships of the time, the Ocean Sea was too vast, too unknown and contained too few rewards of its own. Until the seventeenth century, it remained largely unexplored by Europeans.

Explorations and Speculations

It was the English who took it upon themselves to begin making voyages out into the Ocean Sea. They hoped to open friendly relations with the oceanic empire of the Havai'ians, who had come to rule the peoples of all the tiny islands of the great sea. Their navy of spidery pontoon ships had repeatedly repelled attempted invasions by the Japanese, the Russians and the Dutch. They had only failed to hold onto the continent of New Holland which was eventually partitioned between the Dutch, English and Spanish and renamed Australia. To the southeast lay Aotearoa, where the Havai'ians had built Kupe, their western imperial capital. In 1675, they invaded and held the Azores, cementing their control of the entire Ocean Sea although they were repelled from Iceland. Their empire, while having land totaling only slightly more than that of France, covered more than half the Earth. Furthermore, the Havai'ians insisted that they were not the true lords of the Ocean. That distinction, they said, belonged to others.

The Naturalists...and the Wa'e'e

Starting in the late seventeenth century, European naturalists and explorers started to make visits to various locations in the Ocean Sea. While the great powers of Europe and Asia were more or less at odds with the Havai'ians,

the scientific community was generally met with cooperation and actually practiced a certain amount of trade in the watery half of the world.

Among the objects that they received from the islanders were ceramic-like objects, tools and remarkable art objects that had been made in a style unlike anything they had seen. They seemed to have been formed from a substance somewhere between coral and pearl that had been encouraged to grow into the shapes needed. The Hawai'ian traders said the products came from the *wa'e'e*. For quite some time, the Europeans assumed that the *wa'e'e* were some sort of elite artisan class that perhaps might have had godlike aspects to the islanders.

As the Hawai'ian Empire grew to a world power, commerce grew and the vast ocean became better known to Europeans. The *wa'e'e* artifacts became coveted in Europe, Asia and Africa and many merchants and scholars worked relentlessly to discover their origins. There were compelling rumors of an island that is the remotest from anywhere else in the world. The Hawai'ians called it Rapa Nui, the people who lived there called it "Navel of the World". It was on this Island that trade in *wa'e'e* artifacts originated. No European had ever been there, and the Hawai'ian emperor was very protective of its location.

In 1832 a naturalist named Charles Darwin aboard the H.M.S. Beagle was lucky enough to find the clue that would lead to the most astonishing discovery in the history of the world. A group of islands that had no permanent human habitation lay on the equator at 90° longitude. It *did* have very peculiar wildlife including truly gigantic tortoises, which led Darwin to dub them the "Turtle Islands". Here he encountered a man named Te Hupa'e who was a trader that had actually dealt with the *wa'e'e*. Te Hupa'e had been left to guard a treasure in Spanish gold, rare shells from the northern islands and an impressive cache of *wa'e'e* goods.

Te Hupa'e had been alone for three months and was starved for companionship. He spoke several European languages including Spanish, English and Icelandic. It took only a few cups of rum for him to start bragging about his business ventures. In the course of these narratives, he let go many clues to the location of Rapa Nui.

Using Information garnered from Te Hupa'e , the Beagle proceeded to the southwest and within two weeks reached the group of islands that included Rapa Nui.

The island was dominated by great statues. Many, although strikingly strange, clearly depicted human beings or anthropomorphic gods. They were made from black stone with red stone being used to make hats for the

figures. Others, however, were somehow fabricated, perhaps even *grown*, from various colors of coral and had surfaces that resembled in places pearl or shell. They depicted beings that were part fish, part crab, part squid part Heaven-only-knows. The creatures looked like the embodiment of every possible denizen of the sea. They were very clearly the works of the wa'e'e, although on a grand scale.

By the water stood a structure, a simple pavilion with columns of what seemed to be pure light green pearl. As the landing boat from the Beagle approached the shore, a group of people waved their arms and cried "Lorana! Lorana!". They welcomed the travelers and brought them into a small town near the shore. Everywhere were the great human figures they called *moai* and the far stranger figures that they called *hoa'atu*. The *hoa'atu* were made by the wa'e'e. These pretty islanders knew that the Europeans were not supposed to be there, but their deep belief in fate led them to know that there was some purpose to be served by their presence.

The green pearl structure was called "Meeting House of the Wa'e'e", and it was there that the sailors and Darwin were led. A community leader of the island said to Darwin, "It is in this place that we meet with the owners of the world."

Darwin was taken aback by the characterization. Were they to meet a god?

The meeting place was constructed with a floor that had a large hole in the center that opened into deep water. There was a bar of heavy stone suspended by a rope hanging down into the water. The island leader walked up to the hole and struck the stone with a wooden mallet and it gave forth with a muted, watery ringing sound.

Almost instantly, there was a discernable stirring in the water. Shapes could be seen beneath the surface. Darwin thought that they might be Coelenterates, jellyfish of some description, but of what type he knew not. They were considerably larger than any jellyfish he had seen. Compared to coelenterates he had studied, these seemed far more complex in structure. Darwin was shocked to see that the creature below him in the water now regarded him with a single fist-sized eye floating within it. Many hair-like tendrils radiated from it into the general its gelatinous mass. Apparently, the creature had no centralized brain. The eye had not been apparent mere seconds before. The naturalist stepped backward as two thick, transparent tentacles broke the water's surface and slapped down upon the pearly floor. The ends of the tentacles flattened and flowed in a peculiar fashion and smaller protrusions formed themselves. In a matter of a few seconds they had become duplicates of human arms, human arms as if they had been sculpted in glass. Using its new limbs, the shining, baglike creature hauled

itself from the water. It continued to alter its shape. Its body flowed and formed although its various internal structures seemed to remain more or less the same, accommodating themselves to the new shape any way that seemed convenient. As the visitors watched in amazement the creature became an approximation of the human form and soon, more than a mere approximation. They now saw before them a woman, seemingly made of glass, but otherwise possessing those attributes common to all women. Her face was formed entirely of transparent jelly with the eyes being made of the same. It was the single eye that now floated somewhere in her midsection through which she really saw the world. It walked awkwardly near the opening in the floor as the visitors watched pink coral-like bones form within the transparent flesh. They were not formed similarly to human bones, but were designed to serve the same purpose. Inside her chest was more like a basket weave than human ribs, the spine, a mere flexible rod. The bones in the lower arms and shins were single rather than double. The hands and head remained boneless. Inward from its simulated mouth, a bubble formed and pushed down its throat to form a bag within its chest. Into this, it drew in breath making its transparent jelly breasts heave forward. “*Ko ai tou ingoa?*” came a high, breathy inquiry.

The civic leader looked at Darwin. “The wa’e’e wishes to know your name!”, he said.

“I am Charles Robert Darwin.” Darwin spoke as if in a trance.

The creature’s eye floated up into the transparent head. Lidless, it stared Darwin down. The naturalist was still in wonderment over the striking difference between the wa’e’e’s surface and its obvious inhumanity.

Again the wa’e’e spoke in its strange voice. “Charobadawin.” It continued in the language of Rapa Nui that was quickly translated by the chief. “Why have you sought the wa’e’e?”, he was asked.

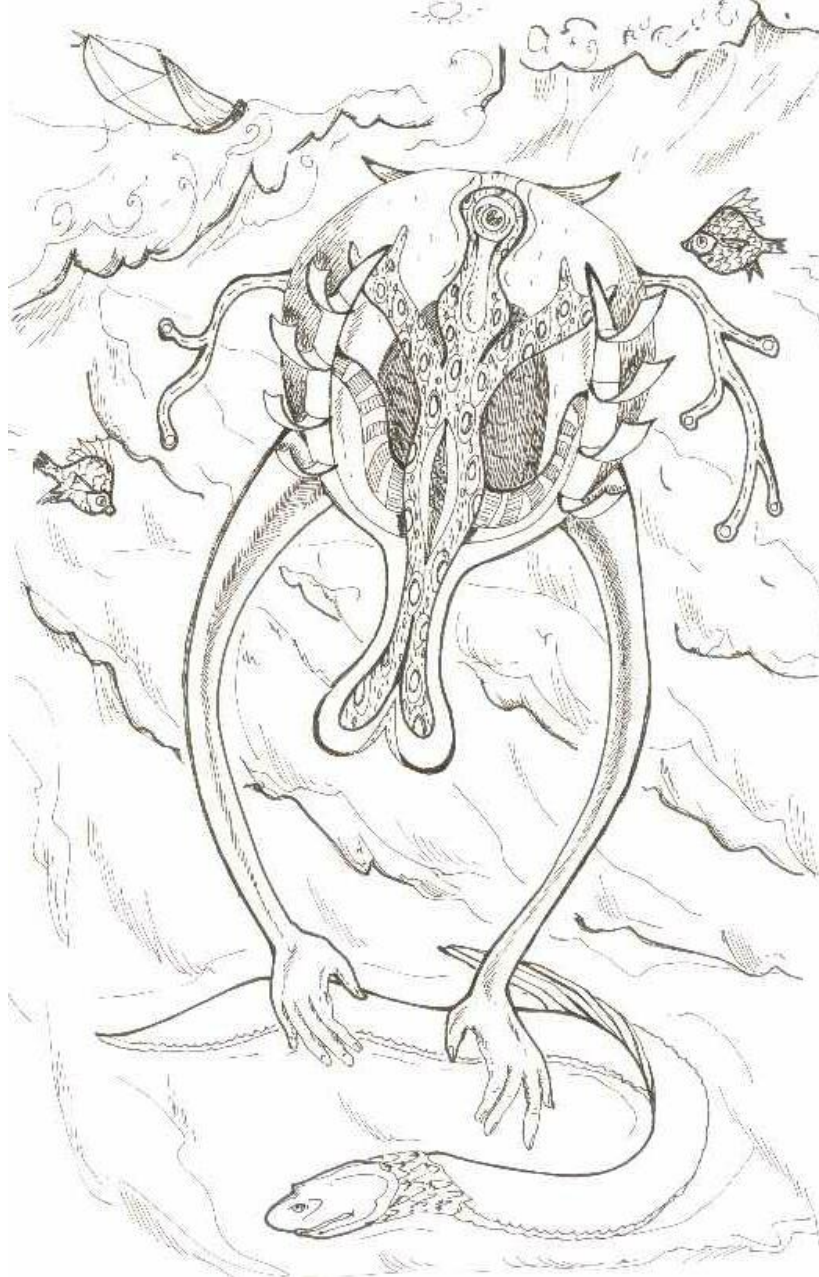
“Trade...and knowledge. In my specific case, knowledge alone.”

The creature, of course had no reliable expression. Its female face kept a more or less neutral expression save for a few occasions where the facial features vanished altogether to create a distortion free window for the huge eye. “We need little from the land. We allow the island ones to stay because they are few. The creatures of the great lands that you come from have nothing to offer us. The island ones make decorative objects that we sometimes find interesting and we exchange *dohe*, that they find valuable, for them.”

“What exactly are ‘dohe’?”, asked Darwin.

Its left arm started to shrink and the forearm ‘bone’ started to erupt through the surface of her hand until she was holding it in the hand of a now

short and jointless arm. With the other hand, she passed the formerly internal structure to Darwin. It was a more or less simple cylinder, rounded at one end and dished out at the other end where it had joined with the hand. It was covered with a thin layer of slime, but was hard and smooth beneath. As Darwin held the cast off bone, the creature reabsorbed the remainder of the arm and lost its human shape, taking on an odd morphology with three tripod legs and many tentacles near the middle of a tapered cylinder body.



The creature pointed its eye at Darwin. “We the wa’e’e, have always been able to grow dohe within us to support, or sometimes outside to protect us. When we became thinking creatures, we also learned to create dohe to

express ourselves and to create tools.” To illustrate, the wa’e’e placed a beautifully finished pulley on the floor in front of Darwin and the sailors. One of the sailors picked it up in wonder and spun the wheel with his hand.

Outside of the green pearl pavilion, something loudly broke the surface of the water. Something strange. It was a rubbery sphere approximately ten feet in diameter. The wa’e’e said “Is it your wish to see our world?” The sphere, under its own power approached the pavilion and an opening appeared in its side at the level of the floor. Darwin realized that the sphere was another wa’e’e or, at least, a related type of being. The creature had used its ability to alter its shape to enclose a volume of air.

Darwin, in spite of urging to the contrary from his shipmates, accepted the invitation and followed the strange creature and the chief into the gelatinous sphere.

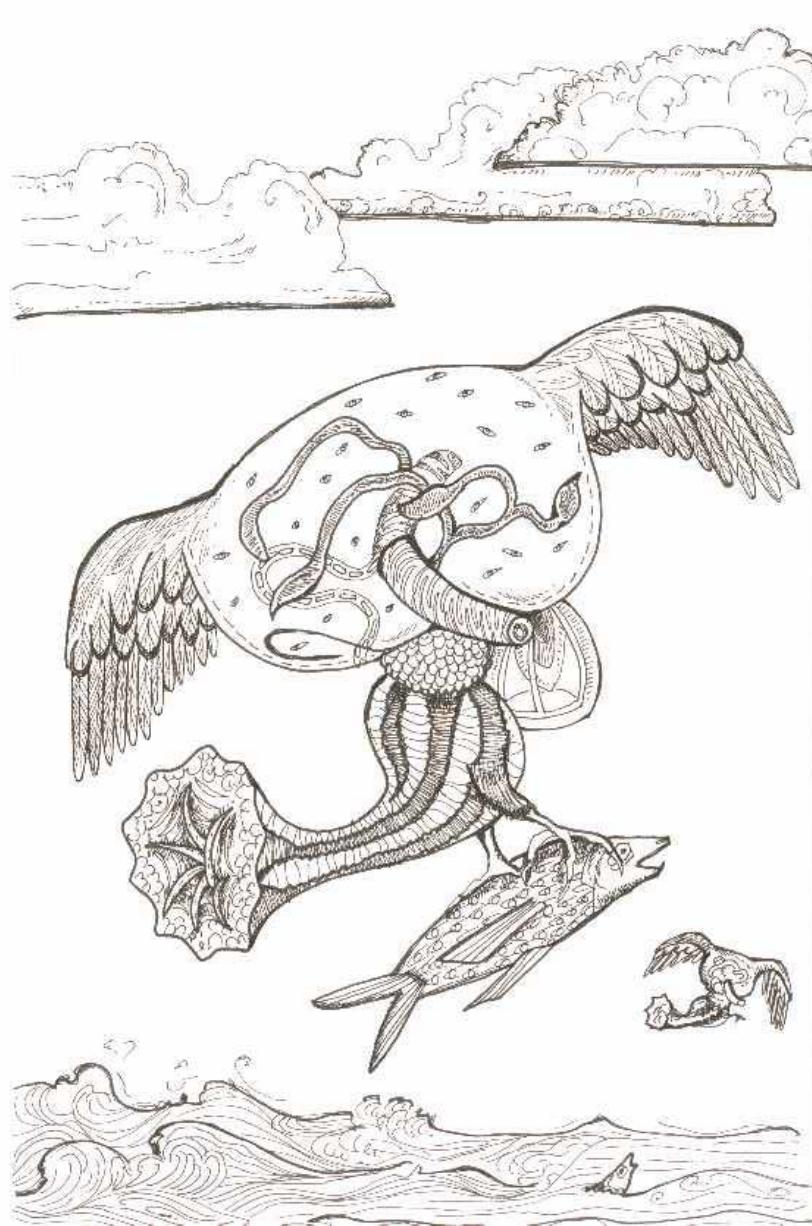
Almost instantly, the entryway closed behind them and they were beneath the surface of the sea. The creature which served as their "ship" was not perfectly spherical, but actually had a muscular "skirt" that contracted rhythmically driving them along at high speed as well as a plethora of tentacles that were so long that the ends of longest of them dwindled from view even in the clear blue waters.

On the shores of Rapa Nui, the crew of the *Beagle* waited for Darwin's return for three days before giving him up as dead. They continued their voyage into the west, now wary of the monsters that inhabited the Ocean Sea.

Darwin was not dead. The living ship bore him and the wa'e'e eastward until a great plateau could be seen rising from the obscure depths into the blue-green tinted sunlight. Only two-hundred or so feet below the surface of the gigantic sea was a sunken land. Could this have been the Atlantis of ancient legend?

The wa'e'e spoke, and through the translation of the islander told Darwin of this new region of the sea.

"Beneath the waters is the land of the wa'e'e. Reaching almost to the places where the stars revolve in both the north and the south, they are two huge lands beneath the sea. Here the wa'e'e were raised from the humblest of creatures over the ages to the estate of owners of the world. The bubble animal touched down upon what would have been a mountain top had the land been above the water, and the wa'e'e simply passed through the side of the ship to swim freely in the water beside them. The creature now resembled a typical bell-shaped jellyfish although much more complex in general structure.



They went down the mountainside and the water pressure caused the ship to shrink around Darwin and the chief. "Have no fear", said the islander, "I have made this wondrous journey before. We are safe. The wa'e'e honors us as guests in their empire."

Descending to the plain, the land beneath the sea was crowded with wa'e'e of a million shapes. These creatures could adapt any type of living excrescence required for what ever purpose they might require.

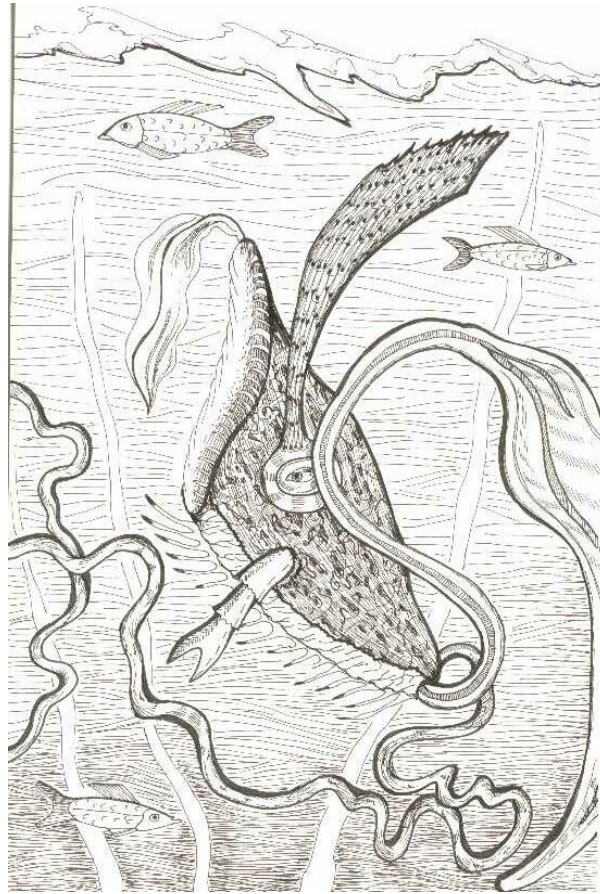
Some had crab-like claws, some compressed into streamlined fish shapes to swiftly move through the water or grew squid-like tentacles to hold onto rocks or coral. Darwin saw more than one example that had sprouted human-like arms. They had been given by nature the ability to make themselves

according to the needs of their situation and Darwin was convinced that this quality is what brought them to civilization. It was the next thing that Darwin saw that brought home to him that the wa'e'e indeed had a civilization. On the plains, huge structures of the coral/pearl-like substance that they made within themselves were rising. They were far more enormous than any edifice created by the hand of man. These artificial mountains rose from the plain upon which the wa'e'e lived to almost touch the surface of the sea, and Darwin could observe that some of the very tallest were still under construction. Darwin didn't know it just yet, but the "Age of Castles" had begun.

Over quite a few days, Darwin was acquainted with many aspects of the culture of the wa'e'e. He saw too many examples to numerate of how their power was far greater than that of humanity. They could move great numbers of their population halfway around the world in only a few days, they could build mighty structures in a short amount of time. They were fully capable of clearing human life from all the islands of the Ocean Sea on a whim.

Darwin was deposited in the Canary Islands three days after he was last seen on Rapa Nui. It would have taken the *Beagle* a minimum of forty days to cover the same distance. His story had been already published in London by the time *Beagle* returned with all hands believing him dead. Mankind did not accept immediately that they were not the lords of creation. Quite the contrary, the leaders of several great powers made plans for eventual war against the wa'e'e.

Castles



On July sixteenth 1871, the first of the structures broke the surface of the sea at 150° longitude 63° latitude. It was a simple, cylindrical tower of unbroken porcelain white about two thirds of a mile wide. A Russian fishing boat was within sight of the event when it took place. In a matter of hours, it was raised many hundreds of feet above the waters. In the distance, the Russian sailors saw thousands of wa'e'e swarming all over it in various specialized shapes.

The structure was joined by others in a line snaking its way roughly south over the next few years. The wa'e'e prevented any Europeans or Asians from approaching although certain persons in the Havai'ian Empire visited but revealed nothing of what they saw. The structures came to be known as "castles", but they really didn't resemble European medieval fortresses in any distinguishing particulars.

By the turn of the century, a number just short of one million castles had risen from the sea making a clear outline of the sunken continents. As well,

several castles rose from the undersea mountain range running almost from pole to pole. Some islands were the tops of this range such as the Azores.

The portion of the castles that reached above the sea seemed to serve special purposes including astronomy, weather research and industry. The wa'e'e themselves could not survive out of water for more than an hour or so, therefore they created remote mechanisms to perform work for them above the surface or protective garments that contained a volume of water. With increasing frequency, photographs from the Havai'ian Empire showed the islanders appearing in the company of wa'e'e in protective clothing. The wa'e'e created flying machines that could move at tremendous speeds to carry them to distant castles. By 1920, observations confirmed that there had been wa'e'e visits to the Moon.

In Europe, the movement to destroy the wa'e'e was gaining momentum, particularly in Germany and England. A trade disagreement between Germany and Havai'i exploded into war in 1921 and Germany captured the Azores. Encouraged by their victory and using propaganda to polarize the populations of Europe, they attacked a castle to the south of the Azores with artillery and explosives, destroying it entirely above the water. The sea around the site of the castle was filled with the floating bodys of wa'e'e. The wa'e'e did not respond save for complaints relayed by the Havai'ians. Europe responded by destroying more castles and devising new weapons that could poison large areas of the Ocean Sea. This was used against the largest concentration of castles in the northern hemisphere. The results were greater than the Europeans could have imagined. It is estimated that twenty million wa'e'e were killed as a result of this attack and many thousands of Europeans, mostly in Iceland and Ireland, as well when ocean currents swept the poison into major fishing grounds. Some in Europe protested that the use of this weapon would doom mankind. They used science to back up their claims as well as omens and strange signs on the Moon. A huge shadow had passed over the Moon and now its color and features were changing.

In spite of the repercussions on their own people, the Europeans planned a second attack. Six months later, the poison was released near another large grouping of castles. Strangely, there were only a few wa'e'e corpses seen following the second attack and none after a third. Huge regions of the Ocean were now bereft of life, both human and wa'e'e. The eastern half of the Havai'ian Empire, all islands with dead or dying populations, was divided up between various European powers. Now the Turtle Isles were their eastern most outpost. The castles were found to be universally uninhabited, the eradication of the wa'e'e had been accomplished, or so it

seemed. Now the castles stood as broken hulks, guano covered roosts for sea birds.

Astronomers reported that the face of the Moon had changed radically. They could now see clouds above the surface and the albedo had increased by eighty percent. It was believed that the surface now had a considerable amount of water.

In 1941 a strange creature descended from the heavens. It seemed to be organic, but it flew on jets of fire. It was a vehicle of the wa'e'e, who had taken up residence on the Moon. The Spaceship alighted on Rapa Nui.

The Hawai'ian government made an announcement that was published in every country of Europe, Asia and Africa. The owners of the Earth had come to reclaim their property.